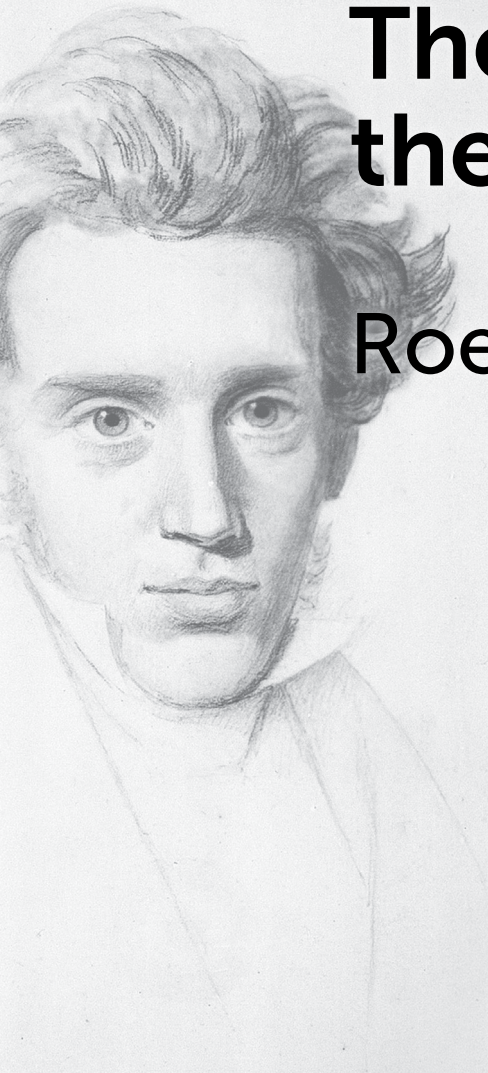
Cambridge Elements

The Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard

The Ethical and the Religious

Roe Fremstedal



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THE ETHICAL AND THE RELIGIOUS

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Abstract: This Element discusses the relation between the ethical and religious as key concepts in Kierkegaard's works. Instead of viewing the ethical and religious mainly as different stages on life's way, it identifies different connections between ethical and religious considerations, reasons, and values. By discussing Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, it argues that – despite appearances – religion does not undermine but rather supports moral constraints. However, Kierkegaard is clear that our moral requirements exceed our natural capabilities, something that makes divine assistance morally necessary. Thus, religious belief seems supported by moral reasons. Still, we often recognize moral truth without seeing the metaphysical and theological implications of morality. Therefore, moral agents need not be religious believers, although morality nevertheless has metaphysical and theological implications if Kierkegaard is correct. Specifically, Kierkegaard seems to combine realism regarding value with the view that some moral requirements are divinely commanded.

Keywords: the moral gap, pragmatism regarding belief, ethics, religion, divine assistance

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Introduction: Traditional Readings and Contemporary Debates

The Ethical and Religious: Stages, Reasons, and Values

How can we make sense of Kierkegaard's view of the ethical and the religious? And how does it relate to *contemporary* debates on the one hand and to *traditional* readings of Kierkegaard on the other? To deal with these issues, we must distinguish between different senses that these terms have in different contexts (instead of just using "the ethical" and "the religious" as *shorthands* without explanation).

This Cambridge Element discusses "the ethical" and "the religious" as key terms in Kierkegaard (and much of the secondary literature). Like ethics and religion, these terms take on a range of different meanings in different contexts. Without exhausting all senses of the terms here, this Element gives an overview of some of the fundamental issues.

First, "the ethical" and "the religious" could both represent different *stages on life's way* (see Section 1). I argue that Kierkegaard's ethical stage is understood as a form of moral life that does not see morality as being dependent on divine assistance and grace. The religious stage, by contrast, is defined by its reliance on divine assistance and grace *in* the moral life (with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as an apparent counterexample). Quite independent of the details here, this widespread approach is known as the *theory of stages* in secondary literature (see Kingo, 1988: 123–56).

Second, sometimes Kierkegaard seems concerned with *adverbs* here. We may live (or act) ethically and/or religiously. Similarly, we may believe and think ethically and/or religiously. These adverbs describe different ways (or modes) of doing something that may fall short of a theory of stages (in part because many of these issues arise independently and in part because the theory of stages itself is incomplete).

Third, "the ethical" and "the religious" could refer to different *beliefs* (e.g., murder is morally prohibited, or human sacrifice is divinely commanded). Here Kierkegaard is clear that religious belief is not primarily an epistemic (intellectual) assent to doctrine but rather a practical and moral attitude of trust and love (see Section 2). Christian belief, in particular, is closely related to the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Moral beliefs, on the other hand, concern moral truth as well as moral reasons and values (see Sections 4 and 5).

This brings us to the fourth point, namely that both "the ethical" and "the religious" could represent reasons. Like self-interested reasons, moral

reasons are practical reasons.[1] That is, they are reasons to act and live, including reasons to develop character traits and virtues. Moral requirements, in particular, represent decisive reasons. Religious reasons, on the other hand, are not just *epistemic* reasons to believe something but also *practical* reasons. On Kierkegaard's existential account, these include reasons to develop religious character traits and virtues. Unlike much of the secondary literature, I will here argue that, for Kierkegaard, religious reasons do not conflict with moral reasons (e.g., by requiring child sacrifice). Rather, religious reasons support moral ones (Sections 2 and 3) and there seem to be moral reasons for religious belief (Section 4).[2]

Finally, "the ethical" and "religious" could concern different *values* (goods and evils). Here Kierkegaard contrasts the Christian view of God as morally good and loving with the pagan view of him as a powerful tyrant who undermines morality (see Section 2). Ethically, he claims that we must love each other as God loves us. Metaphysically, he *identifies* God with love and moral goodness (see Section 5). Like Augustine and Kant, he takes the highest good not just to be a moral value but also the kingdom of God, which includes religious salvation and personal happiness (see Sections 2 and 3).

These different senses – which are hardly exhaustive – could *combine* in various ways.[3] Reasons, for instance, could be value based (e.g., reasons to promote virtue or happiness as goods). Arguably, the religious stage entails moral reasons *and* values in different ways (see Section 1–5). More controversially, moral requirements (which represent decisive reasons) could call for divine assistance (see Section 3) and there could be (decisive) moral reasons for religious belief (see Section 4).

We will then see many indications that, for Kierkegaard, ethics and religion are essentially *interrelated* rather than being independent or merely

[1] Reasons could be relative, perspectival (or adverbial) reasons, such as moral reasons that contrast with overall reasons, all-things-required. The same issue applies to religious reasons and even to values more generally. Like reasons, values could either be relative and perspectival, or they could represent overall verdicts that are non-perspectival. This is related to a metaphysical issue, namely that reasons and values could both be either relative to agents or be independent of agents. As a moral realist, Kierkegaard suggests that the good is good in itself (in an *agent-neutral* manner) rather than what is merely good for someone (in an *agent-relative* manner).

[2] Here Kierkegaard speaks explicitly of a "valid reason [*fornuftig Grund*]" (SKS 15, 182, 207 / BA, 59, my trans.), something that clearly refers to a normative practical reason that is not defeated or overridden.

[3] An additional sense here concerns the *symbolic* nature of religious language (see Fremstedal, 2014a: 164–6 and 2022: 188–9, 219, 232).

incidentally connected. That is, Kierkegaard suggests that there must be connections between ethics and religion that are *essential* and necessary, not just contingent. Specifically, the relation between the two is not so much characterized by conflict as by mutual support or even some identity. At least, that is what I will argue here.

In any case, this Element cannot be exhaustive, if Kierkegaard (and the pseudonym Climacus) is right that, like love, the ethical is *infinite*, inexhaustible, and immensurable (SKS 7, 143 / CUP1, 153–4; SKS 9, 11, 180 / WL, 3, 180). Since God himself is said to be love *and* goodness alike, this point holds equally for the religious and the ethical, pointing to confluence between the two. To Kierkegaard, the ethical and the divine are both infinite and impossible to exhaust, since we can never be finished with the ethical task or with divine love or goodness. Nor is anyone excluded from either one (cp. Dalferth, 2023: 92), so that both seem *ubiquitous*.

Traditional Readings and Contemporary Debates

The reading of Kierkegaard presented here in different ways resonate with the *contemporary* discussions: First, the different stages on life's way anticipate and influence contemporary discussions of virtue theory and selfhood (personal identity). Specifically, Kierkegaard argues that the (Christian) virtues of faith, hope, and love overcome doublemindedness and despair, making the self coherent or wholehearted. Thus, it is not clear that Kierkegaard's account supports entirely secular ethics (Section 1).

Second, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and the religious "suspension of the ethical" raise questions of whether ethics and religion could conflict normatively and psychologically by offering competing reasons and motives, respectively (unlike normative reasons, motives need not be justified, legitimate, or rational). Despite appearances, Kierkegaard seems to argue against normative conflict, although the tension between supernatural revelation and natural standards in ethics arguably remains (Section 2).

Third, Kierkegaard's account of Christian and non-Christian ethics anticipates contemporary discussions of whether morality is highly demanding by requiring much of us personally (notably, by calling for self-sacrifice). Specifically, it prepares discussions about the moral gap between what morality requires of us and our limited natural capabilities to live morally without divine assistance (Section 3).

Four, Kierkegaard anticipates ongoing debates on the *ethics of (religious) belief*. Specifically, can practical reasons justify (religious) belief if epistemic evidence is lacking? Like *pragmatism* regarding belief, Kierkegaard seems to argue for an affirmative answer here and to criticize the *evidentialist* view that all justified belief requires sufficient epistemic evidence (Section 4).

Finally, in metaethics, Kierkegaard anticipates contemporary discussions of subjectivism, realism, and divine command theory. Like contemporary divine command theory, he claims that nonbelievers may recognize moral truth without seeing the theological and metaphysical implications of morality (Sections 5 and 6).

To some extent, these issues also overlap with traditional readings of Kierkegaard, which tend to focus on how the religious stage exceeds the ethical and aesthetical stages on life's way. But instead of stressing conflict between ethics and religion, this Element points to overlap and mutual support between the two. Instead of viewing the ethical and religious merely (or mainly) as different *stages* on life's way, this Element points to many different connections between ethics and religion that often concern *reasons* and *values*, not just stages on life's way (or different character traits associated with the stages on life's way). Indeed, I argue that one need not presuppose a theory of stages on life's way to see different connections between reasons *and* values that are moral *and* religious.

Still, I will start in Section 1 by discussing stages on life's way since this traditional approach is so widespread and well-known that it may serve as a starting point. Based on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, Section 2 then considers conflict between ethics and religion. Using *The Concept of Anxiety*, Section 3 introduces the distinction between Christian and non-Christian ethics, connecting it to contemporary debates on the moral gap between our natural capabilities and our moral requirements. Based on this, Section 4 discusses moral reasons for religious belief, known today as pragmatism concerning religious belief. Section 5 then turns to metaethics by considering whether the good or the divine has priority, discussing moral realism and divine command accounts of moral requirements. Finally, Section 6 argues that, for Kierkegaard, we can have justified moral beliefs and judgments without seeing the metaphysical and theological commitments of morality. In this sense, moral agents need not be religious believers, although morality nevertheless has metaphysical and theological implications if Kierkegaard is correct.

1 Different Stages on Life's Way

1.1 Introducing the Stages on Life's Way

By far, the most widespread reading of Kierkegaard claims that there are three stages on life's way: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage. This reading is based on the following passage from *Stages on Life' Way* (1845):

> There are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious …. The esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment … simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet be joyful [*glad*]. (SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476–7)

This passage summarizes the content of *Stages on Life's Way* (not the authorship), describing different stages as different existence spheres (the difference between the two does not matter for our purposes here). Later, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) classifies earlier (pseudonymous and signed) works as belonging to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages.[4] Specifically, *Either/Or* (1843) contrasts the aesthete "A" (in Part I) with the ethicist Judge William (or "B" for short) in Part II. *Fear and Trembling* (1843), on the other hand, contrasts the ethical with the religious. Even though not everything fits into this tripartite scheme, it is so well-known that it can nevertheless serve as a starting point for the discussion here. For our purposes here, the different stages can be understood as follows using some stipulation in order to understand different modes of *selfhood*, which arguably involve different *character traits* (virtues and vices).

Unlike the ethicist, the aesthete is a normative immoralist who does not accept moral requirements (duties or obligations) as being binding for himself. At most, the aesthete then accepts a strategic, instrumental use of morality that serves non-moral ends.[5] Chief among these is

[4] See especially the chapter "A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature," in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. We do not seem to find a theory of stages on life's way before 1845. The 1843 writings use "stage" more loosely for specific views, or ways of life, that are narrower than the three stages on life's way (e.g., different aesthetic views are counted as different stages, see SKS 2, 53 / EO1, 45, and infinite resignation is counted as a stage in its own right, see SKS 4, 132 / FT, 37).

[5] Psychologically and motivationally, the aesthete seems to be an amoralist who is unmoved and indifferent to (his own) moral judgments (e.g., murder is impermissible). At least, he has little or weak, defeatable moral motivation. In any case, motivational amoralism is distinct from normative immoralism, so that these views do not entail each other.

personal happiness (SKS 7, 394 / CUP1, 433), often described in terms of pleasure.[6] In any case, personal happiness does not require moral virtue or other moral constraints for the aesthete. Rather, self-interest or prudence (*Klogskab*) pursues happiness, independently of morality in an egoistic manner.[7]

The ethicist, by contrast, focuses on forming moral character, taking moral requirements to be binding independent of personal happiness and self-interest. Motivationally and normatively, this requires prioritizing moral requirements over competing motives. In addition, the ethicist maintains that he is capable of being moral (or even happy), because of a *rational world order* where his personality and natural capacities fit his duty and calling perfectly (see SKS 3, 257, 265, 277, 305 / EO2, 270, 279, 292, 323; SKS 6, 145 / SLW, 155).[8] Like a Pelagian (or Stoic), he believes he can (always) save himself without divine grace or divine assistance (see SKS 7, 234 / CUP1, 257; Fremstedal, 2014a: 142–3). But it is exactly this assumption that later works reject. Like *Stages on Life's Way*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* concludes that the moral agent

[6] Here "*lykke*" is translated "good fortune" by the Hongs. This brings out the fact that happiness is dependent on external factors beyond our control. But the connection to classical debates regarding human happiness, well-being, and eudaimonia becomes less visible. Kierkegaard seems to be a psychological eudaimonist who takes us to be motivated and moved by personal happiness. Indeed, happiness as a good may even generate reasons to act. But Kierkegaard takes such reasons and motives to be limited by moral requirements normatively. Here he attacks ethical eudaimonism explicitly for giving an egoistic account of morality that overlooks the difference between morality and prudence (see Fremstedal, 2022: 77–102).

Instead of being an ordinary hedonist, the pseudonym "A" claims that "pleasure consists not in what I enjoy but in getting my own [will]" (SKS 2, 40 / EO1, 31, modified translation). This is not just any kind of pleasure. It is a will to always get one's will, irrespective of its content. Put differently, it is a second-order will to always get one's first-order will about something realized. This anticipates contemporary desire-satisfactionism regarding happiness: Happiness is to get one's desires satisfied. However, Roberts (2022: 64) notes that "A" is particularly concerned with higher pleasures, such as "the joys of irony, intellectual playfulness, and invention."

[7] "*Klogskab*" is often translated "shrewdness" or "sagacity," but "prudence" is arguably better. Kierkegaard uses it mainly for egoistic, calculating self-interest that is independent of normative moral constraints. But there exist a few cases where he uses it for wisdom or practical reason that includes both morality and self-interest (Fremstedal, 2022: 98–99; Roberts, 2022: 101–4).

[8] This rational world order is not a-religious. Rather, it represents a sacred or *divine order*, which is taken to be good and just. Instead of being transcendent, it seems identified with the established order and its institutions and practices (see Westphal, 1991: 77 and 2014: 48–9; Furtak, 2005: 92–6). Therefore, Judge William consistently uses religious language, taking ethical and religious virtues to be interdependent and continuous (SKS 3, 249 / EO2, 262), attacking mysticism for separating God from social relations (SKS 3, 230–3 / EO2, 241–4). Similarly, *Fear and Trembling* identifies the ethical and its duties with the divine and with God (SKS 4, 160 / FT, 68).

inevitably falls short of the moral requirement (SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476; SKS 7, 242–3 / CUP1, 266–7), something that is a central claim that motivates the turn to religion and religious ethics.

The religious stage clearly rejects the Pelagian view that we can save ourselves by our own, unaided powers. *Fear and Trembling*, notably, describes religious belief as a "double movement of faith," which takes the following form:[9]

I) Renouncing (resigning) entirely our own ability to realize the highest good – our telos (end, purpose) – by our own, unaided powers.
II) Nevertheless, to believe that the very same good will be realized by divine power and intervention (SKS 4, 129–56 / FT, 34–52).[10]

In a subjective sense, the highest good just refers to what we happen to value the most (see SKS 4, 163 / FT, 71). The lad in *Fear and Trembling*, for instance, has a princess as his highest good (SKS 4, 136–7, 163 / FT, 41–2, 71). However, in his social setting, getting the princess is practically impossible for him (e.g., he lacks royal blood, worldly means, and social support that would all be necessary for getting the princess). Still, he does *not* stop valuing the princess. Indeed, (I) the human impossibility of getting her does not prevent (II) that it is possible for God to give her to him. Thus, renouncing her still allows belief that she might be returned by divine power and intervention.

However, the story of the princess is only a minor illustration that represents a subjective approximation to religious belief (Pap. X–6, B68, 76–7 / JP 6, 6598; Pap. X–6, B74, 83).[11] In an objective sense, the highest good is *the* most valuable, even though it need not be subjectively recognized or valued. Here Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms consistently rely on a broadly Augustinian-Kantian concept of the highest good, described as "*evig Salighed*," "eternal happiness," or "eternal salvation," which represents our final end, the "absolute telos" (e.g., SKS 4, 148 / FT,

[9] Like the German word "*Glaube*," the Danish word "*Tro*" used by Kierkegaard covers both (religious) faith and belief more generally.

[10] We seem capable of such renunciation or resignation by our own, unaided power. However, Kierkegaard claims that pagans can only resign if they see that they are unable to realize the good that is renounced. Judaism, on the other hand, supports both resignation and faith in cases where believers are put through an ordeal. Christians, finally, may resign and believe *voluntary* without any such ordeal (SKS 10, 189 / CD, 178–9; SKS 15, 268 / BA, 112–13; SKS 25, 152–3, NB27:39 / KJN 9, 151–2).

[11] The B sections of Pap. are *not* included in KJN or SKS (except for SKS 15, 89–295, which overlaps considerably with Pap. VII–2, B235 and BA). With the exception of BA and short selections in JP (e.g., JP 1, 908 and JP 1, 10–12 and JP 6, 6598–6601), the B sections of Pap. are not translated into English.

54; SKS 7, 353–9, 388, 524 / CUP1, 387–94, 426–7, 502; SKS 9, 240–1 / WL, 239–40). As we will see (in Section 3.4), this good, which comprises virtue, happiness, and a church (or commonwealth), is so demanding that it requires divine assistance for its realization.[12] Thus, it necessarily exceeds human capabilities. It is (I) *practically impossible* for human agents to realize by their own, unaided powers. Yet it is (II) nevertheless *metaphysically possible* to realize by divine power and intervention.

Still, the double movement of faith (as such) abstracts from doctrine and dogmas, focusing on the subjective attitude of believers (i.e., the act whereby we believe).[13] It gives a thin, *formal* characterization of belief (faith) that can be combined with different doctrines, including Jewish and Christian ones (see Pap. X–6, B81, p. 87 / JP 1, 12). As such, it can be combined with different doctrinal contents, which have different implications for ethics and religion.[14] In Kierkegaard, we may distinguish between the following ways to depend on God that are morally relevant:

1. Divine, supernatural *revelation* is needed epistemically or *diagnostically* to understand our situation and its cure. Like Judaism, Christianity – and its ethics – requires revelation as well as doctrine (including dogmas or articles of faith). Specifically, Kierkegaard sees sin-consciousness as decisive here, taking Christian ethics to be based on Christ as a paradigm to be imitated.
2. Divine *grace* is needed for religious conversion and salvation, moral character and sanctification, and for the forgiveness of guilt and sin, which overcomes immorality and despair.
3. Divine assistance is needed for justice and desert that reconciles moral virtue with happiness (so that immorality does not pay, and morality does not require net self-sacrifice).
4. Divine assistance is necessary for the unification and coordination of ethico-religious agents in the kingdom of God.

[12] For a more extended analysis, see Fremstedal, 2014a: 94–145; Fremstedal and Jackson, 2015. See also Green (1992, 2011) on Kierkegaard's relation to Kant.

[13] Indeed, the Danish word "*Bevægelse*," which is used repeatedly in *Fear and Trembling*, means not just physical movement and being moved psychologically but also subjective attitude or state of mind. A double movement could then be a ship that rocks from side to side, or a person who is moved in opposite directions psychologically. See Fremstedal, 2014a: 148; 2014b, 2022: 209.

[14] For Abraham, for example, Isaac represents the highest good. But God's command to sacrifice Isaac means that he cannot save Isaac by his own, unaided powers. Yet, Abraham believes that God will nevertheless save Isaac somehow. See Fremstedal (2014a: 144–8) for an attempt to show that Kierkegaard's later works build on and presuppose the double movement of faith.

5. Divine power and intervention are necessary for personal immortality and eternal salvation (which, again, rely on moral judgments based on divine justice and grace, see SKS 20, 289, NB4:5 / CD, 378; SKS 8, 227–8 / UD, 127–8; SKS 18, 309–10, JJ:508 / KJN 2, 284–5).
6. God could be necessary for grounding (or realizing) some moral requirements or values (see Section 5).

Note that these points require moral standards in many ways (e.g., sin-consciousness requires moral guilt-consciousness). We will see that different works by Kierkegaard and different commentators focus on different aspects here. Points 3 and 4 have received the least attention but arguably follow from Kierkegaard's broadly Augustinian-Kantian concept of the highest good, which he and the pseudonyms describe as "*evig Salighed*," "eternal happiness," or "eternal salvation," that represents our telos, vocation, or final end (see Section 3.4). To Kierkegaard, this end calls for the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity that overcome double-mindedness or despair, not just in the sense of perceived hopelessness but also in the sense of having an *incoherent* self (which fails to reconcile ideals with reality or freedom with constraints typically). Such virtues then represent character traits and dispositions that unify selfhood so that it becomes coherent or wholehearted (Fremstedal, 2022; Roberts, 2022).

1.2 Ethics and Religion: Mere Stages on Life's Way?

In a highly influential work, Georg Brandes (1877: 170) used the three stages on life's way as *the* interpretative key to the entire authorship of Kierkegaard. However, Brandes concludes, "Despite his attempt to squeeze the ethical sphere in-between the aesthetic and religious spheres, Kierkegaard only believed in two possibilities: [aesthetic] hedonism or [religious] askesis, the life of pleasure or renunciation" (1877: 155, my trans.). This conclusion is based on two different assumptions. First, morality is only a "passing stage" or a *bridge* to faith for Kierkegaard (1877: 171, 185; see also Høffding, 1919: 109–26). Second, the ethical sphere itself is not sufficiently delimited from the religious one. That is, Kierkegaard lacks a rational, humane (secular) ethics that is independent of religion (Brandes, 1877: 171). Any morality found in Kierkegaard is therefore religious, Brandes complains (not entirely without reason). Worse still, Kierkegaard's religious ethics supports immorality by supporting Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Like Abraham, the religious believer breaks with morality and is incomprehensible to others. Thus, religion is immoral and irrational (1877: 186).

On first look *and* from the point of view of Brandes, *Stages on Life's Way* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* support the first point. The former claims, "The ethical sphere is only a transition sphere [*Gjennemgangssphære*]" (SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476). The latter, similarly, concludes that the "inadequacy of *Either/Or* is simply that the work ended ethically" (SKS 7, 268 / CUP1, 294). This central claim can be read either as saying that the ethical must be *left behind* by religion or as saying that *mere ethics* without religion is inadequate.[15] But despite appearances, the term "transition sphere" here does not mean that ethics is left behind. Instead, the idea is that we are never finished with ethics: "the ethical sphere is a passageway [*Gjennemgang*] – which one nevertheless does not pass through once and for all" (SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 477). Indeed, "[t]he ethical is and remains the highest task assigned to every human being" and represents "the life-principle of the whole," including the stages on life's way (SKS 7, 141 / CUP1, 151–2). As such, religion must presuppose, not violate, ethics. Still, Brandes could be right that Kierkegaard does not portray ethics without any religion. At least, ethics has theological implications for Kierkegaard (see Sections 2–7).

1.3 How to Relate Ethics and Religion?

Particularly the Danish scholarship has criticized the theory of stages (see Kingo, 1988: 123–56, 161–72; Søltoft, Garff, and Olesen, 1998: 7–191). Instead of going into all the details here, there are at least some aspects that are relevant for understanding the ethical and religious in Kierkegaard: Even if the theory of stages does summarize some key elements of the pseudonymous authorship from *Either/Or* (1843) to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), it nevertheless seems schematic and somewhat simplistic. It creates the misleading impression that the ethical and religious are alternative, competing stages, but there are surely many ways to combine ethics and religion, both in Kierkegaard and other thinkers, that the theory tends to miss. We will see examples of this in the later sections, but even this section indicates that the ethical stage includes religiousness, while the religious stage includes (religious) ethics. There are simply several options and variants here that a categorization into the stages cannot fully capture. This is related to the fact that the theory of stages itself comes in different variants and is subject to a range of different interpretations (see further details below). It is not

[15] Even this is a simplification if Judge William believes in a world order that is rational and divine. See footnote 8.

a clear or developed theory but rather a rough summary and shorthand (which peaks around 1845–1846) that stands in need of clarification, elaboration, and reconstruction. Consider the following issues:

A. The relation between *stages* and *existence-spheres* is not clarified. Nor is the relation between stages and *substages* clear.[16]
B. Partially as a result, the number of stages or spheres varies from *three* to *seven* (SKS 7, 455, 483n / CUP1, 501, 531n).
C. The stages themselves could either be read as a *virtue theory* or as an *existentialist* account of (in)authenticity, which is episodic and precludes stable character traits and virtues (Roberts, 2022: 47–8).
D. The stages could be idealized in different ways (or not at all).
E. The theory could either describe *psychological* developmental stages, or it could concern the *normative* justification of religiousness and/or ethics instead. The former describes our (actual or idealized) psychological development, whereas the latter *pre*scribes how we must develop in order to be justified. Even though the former could be accounted for and explained, it need not be justified (or legitimate) like the latter is.
F. Are the transitions between stages *blind leaps of faith* or some kind of *rational progress* (see Fremstedal, 2022: ch. 10)? Is there linear progress from one stage to another, or do later stages lose insights that are found in earlier stages (Lippitt and Evans 2024: part iii)?
G. Are some or all stages *necessary* or merely *contingent* (and in what sense)?
H. Is the *truth* of Christianity presupposed from the start, or does it somehow result from the theory?

Instead of developing a comprehensive theory of stages, many of the issues that concern ethics and religion can be discussed independently of the stages. In fact, this has already been done to some extent (although the theory of stages has been influential, particularly in the 1877–1995 period). Like others, Kierkegaard scholars can then discuss ethics and religion independently of the stages.

The contrast between ethical and religious stages could be misleading if religion includes ethics and vice versa. It then seems more accurate to speak of *specific* ethical and religious views that combine in specific ways. Some views conflict, whereas others agree or overlap. Although Kierkegaard is widely thought to highlight conflict here, we will see that this cannot

[16] See footnote 4 for the latter issue.

possible be the whole story. Rather, Kierkegaard's account presupposes considerable confluence between ethics and religion, by stressing Christian ethics and (what he repeatedly describes as) "the ethico-religious."[17]

But it then seems difficult to account for nonreligious (and non-Christian) ethics. We will therefore discuss if all such ethical views have religious implications or religious presuppositions for Kierkegaard. But *if* that is the case, how could Kierkegaard then account for *conflict* between ethics and religion? To discuss this, we start with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, which presents a notorious case of conflict between ethics and religion that seems to presuppose that ethics and religion are distinct and independent, at least in part.

2 Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac: A Religious "Suspension of the Ethical"?

2.1 Immorality and Normative Conflict

Famously, *Fear and Trembling* describes Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as involving a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (SKS 4, 150 / FT, 56), in which the ethical is suspended by a higher, religious telos. If anything, this seems to be a clear, paradigmatic case of normative *conflict* between ethics and religion that concerns conflicting lines of action. It takes the following form:

1. It is (categorically) morally forbidden to murder humans;
2. Abraham is (categorically) required to sacrifice Isaac by God (Pap. IV, B67 / JP 1, 908; SKS 4, 159 / FT, 66; SKS 24, 375, NB24:89 / KJN 8, 379).

In this case, there seems to be normative conflict here between,

1*. The (categorical) moral requirement to love the neighbor;
2*. the (categorical) religious requirement to love and obey God (Jackson, 2010: 178–94).

At least, this is how it looks to the nonreligious pseudonym Johannes de silentio, who Kierkegaard used when he published *Fear and Trembling*. But instead of giving clear priority to either requirement here, de silentio merely highlights the *normative* and *motivational* (psychological) conflict between them, without offering any clear overall verdict. Psychologically,

[17] In a wide sense, "the ethico-religious" could cover all views that combine ethics and religion, including Christian ethics and the ethical stage. More narrowly, it seems associated with natural ("immanent") religiousness in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. For a discussion, see Fremstedal, 2022: 125–35.

these concern conflicting motives that Abraham seems exposed to. Normatively, these concern conflicting requirements (duties or obligations) that are incompatible (and thus mutually nonsatisfiable). Here de silentio concludes that Abraham is *either* a murderer *or* a paradigmatic believer who performs a "holy and God-pleasing act" (SKS 4, 147 / FT, 53; see also SKS 4, 105, 126, 150, 183 / FT, 9, 30, 57, 93). *Ethically*, he is a murderer. Yet he is the father of faith, *religiously*. But these adverbs merely represent competing perspectives (and relative reasons and requirements), which fall short of overall requirements.

Still, de silentio clearly suggests that the "teleological suspension of the ethical" involves not just conflict but that religious requirements *override ethical ones*. But this again concerns the perspective of the religious believer, which seems to involve the following assumptions:

I. At least in part, ethical requirements and religious requirements are distinct and nonidentical.
II. In some cases, these requirements *conflict* normatively and motivationally (psychologically).
III. To the religious believer, religious requirements *override* competing ethical requirements *motivationally*.

This does not say that the religious believer is justified in overriding ethical requirements; it only describes his (actual or idealized) psychological motivation. But since Brandes (1877: 186), Kierkegaard has been read as siding with religion here, by at least implicitly making a final claim:

IV. Religious requirements override competing ethical requirements *normatively* (by representing *overall* requirements normatively).

This is the decisive move, which supports *justified immorality*, although it is far from clear that Brandes is right about Kierkegaard here.

2.2 Moral Rationalism: No Justified Immorality

So far Abraham's sacrifice and the "teleological suspension of the ethical" seems *incompatible* with the following view, which Kierkegaard appears to *accept* at least elsewhere (Evans, 2006 [2004]: 16, 20–1; Fremstedal, 2022: 41–135):

> *Moral rationalism*: the view that moral requirements are (always) overall requirements normatively that therefore provide decisive (and most) reason overall to do what morality requires. Any competing consideration is then *overridden* or *defeated* normatively.

The opposite view is:

> *Moral anti-rationalism*: the view that moral requirements are not always overall requirements normatively that provide decisive (and most) reason overall. Moral requirements could then be *overridden* or *defeated* by competing considerations that represent overall requirements normatively.[18]

In *Fear and Trembling*, the issue is not normative or motivational silencing, in which ethical considerations and ethical requirements count for nothing normatively or motivationally. Rather, the idea is that weighty ethical concerns and requirements are *overridden* and dethroned by religious requirements that have even greater weight, overall (McDaniel, 2020: 430). Thus, the ethical problems of Abraham are taken to have considerable *force and validity* both motivationally and normatively. Therefore, Abraham faces loss and sacrifice when he renounces Isaac. Davenport explains:

> Abraham *remains* under the requirement to love Isaac wholeheartedly, as a parent should. He is not excused from this obligation.… Rather, it is only because he must continue to love Isaac that he is faced with sacrifice and loss, and is unable on his own to pursue what he wills: namely, that Isaac live to father a holy nation. 2008: 219–20; cp. McDaniel, 2020: 447)

There would be no sacrifice or loss if the value of Isaac is silenced by counting for nothing, normatively or motivationally. For sacrifice would not give meaning unless one sacrifice a good that is noninstrumentally valuable and recognize it as such (Lippitt, 2015: 131). In this case, the sacrifice presupposes the independent value of Isaac. Indeed, Isaac, who is to father a nation (SKS 4, 114 / FT, 18), represents Abraham's *highest* value. But this value, the highest good, is outside of Abraham's control. In "the double movement of faith," he therefore resigns entirely on his own ability to realize it. Yet he believes that it can nevertheless be realized by God (SKS 4, 129–45 / FT, 34–52).

2.3 An Indefensible View? Different Responses

The problem here, of course, is that *Fear and Trembling* appears to offer a religious justification for murder and child sacrifice. As a direct result, the book has stirred considerable controversy, and been associated with religious extremism, fanaticism, intolerance, and even terrorism. Indeed,

[18] For a fine-grained discussion of moral rationalism and moral overridingness (not needed for our purposes here), see Archer, 2014.

Stewart (2003: 319) concludes that "de silentio's argument is potentially the same as that of any given fanatical religious terrorist. In short, it justifies any action."

Note that Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac rests on a private revelation that is beyond public reasoning. As a result, it cannot be justified publicly and is therefore *indefensible* (Hösle, 1992; cp. Stewart, 2003: 319). But is not Kierkegaard's religious position – or that of Abraham – then equally indefensible? How can Kierkegaard and Kierkegaardians respond here?

First, to Kierkegaard (and de silentio), reasoning is a social activity that requires that we are open to the reasons, arguments, and insights of others (SKS 4, 177, 180, 201 / FT, 87, 91, 113). Reasoning then requires dialogue and the will to learn from others by using their feedback and critique (SKS 15, 139–40n, 182, 207 / BA, 59). However, it is then difficult to see how any such social reasoning could possibly support anything like the sacrifice of Isaac.

Second, *Fear and Trembling* seems like an intended provocation aimed at Christendom, the complacent, lax, lukewarm bourgeois culture that Kierkegaard thought undermined authentic Christianity from within. Instead of presenting his contemporaries with a likeable Christian that appeals to them, *Fear and Trembling* confronts them with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. By portraying Abraham as the father of faith and as a paradigmatic believer (in *some* respects at least), de silentio highlights the demanding, absurd, and scandalous nature of faith, something that anticipates later works such as *Training in Christianity*. But once we start to read *Fear and Trembling* carefully and consider Kierkegaard's drafts for the work (Pap. IV, B60–B96) and his response to criticism (Pap. X–6, B68–B82), as well as other works, the picture looks far more nuanced.[19] This is quite typical of Kierkegaard, who often starts out with provocations, which are subsequently qualified and nuanced greatly (Moser, 2021: 130).

Third, note that normative conflict between ethics and religion here is portrayed from the *perspective* of de silentio, who is a nonbeliever who says he cannot really understand Abraham. But from the religious perspective of Abraham, this conflict is only *apparent*. Indeed, Davenport (2008: 201) notes that "Abraham believes he can sacrifice Isaac without

[19] Again, apart from BA and short selections (such as JP 1, 908 and JP 1, 10–12 and JP 6, 6598–6601), the B sections of Pap. are *not* included in SKS or KJN or even translated into English. As a result, these texts are often not dealt with in any detail by much of the Anglophone literature. Particularly Kierkegaard's response to criticism in Pap. X–6, B68–B82 is little-known and difficult to read unless one first reads the criticism that Kierkegaard is responding to (see Eiríksson, 1850; Fremstedal, 2022: ch. 11).

murdering him." For Abraham thinks that God will give him Isaac back after he has been sacrificed. Thus, he trusts God's promise that "in his seed all the generation of the earth would be blessed," so that Isaac will come to father a nation (SKS 4, 114 / FT, 18).

Four, unlike the tragical hero who sacrifices a lower value to get a higher one, Abraham – the knight of faith – sacrifices *the* highest value, not because there is any higher value, but because it lies outside of his control and capability. That is, he cannot realize it – the highest good – by his own, unaided power but must rely on divine assistance instead, as explicated in "the double movement of faith" (SKS 4, 129–45 / FT, 34–52). But again, this presupposes not just the value of Isaac but also that ethical considerations and ethical requirements remain in force by being valid (see Section 2.2).

Five, Abraham believes that God is *love*, something de silentio does not believe (Pap. IV, B66; SKS 4, 129–30 / FT, 34–5). Unlike de silentio, Abraham takes God to be *morally good*, assuming that – despite appearances – God cannot require anything immoral or evil. By his very nature, God cannot then undermine morality or support serious conflict between religion and ethics. For Kierkegaard, this is a central Judeo-Christian view that contrasts with the pagan view that God could be a powerful tyrant who undermines morality (SKS 8, 364–5 / UD, 267–8). But such a God does not merit obedience or worship. Instead, immoral religion should be criticized morally, something Kierkegaard himself does repeatedly (Fremstedal, 2022: 93–157).

Still, these responses are hardly satisfactory. For a believer who draws the knife is dangerous even if he believes that God will somehow return the sacrifice. Saying that sacrifice is an act of love hardly helps, especially not when it is incomprehensive why the act is allegedly required. Thus, Kierkegaard and his defenders still face a serious problem here.

A sixth and crucial point here is that, even though Abraham is a paradigmatic believer in some respects (explicated in "the double movement of faith"),[20] he is *unique* and impossible to imitate in others (Rocca, 2002; Fox-Muraton, 2012). Particularly, the requirement to sacrifice Isaac cannot and should not be imitated by others: For it is based on an archaic context that took child sacrifice to be pious (Hösle, 1992: 18–19; Jackson, 2010: 183–99). Instead of being considered murder, the sacrifice of Isaac was here seen as a sacrifice of Abraham's most precious possession (Green, 1988: 90–1), but this is something *Fear and Trembling*

[20] See Section 1.1.

appears to overlook, probably to provoke Christendom and to emphasize the independent value of Isaac.

In this archaic context, God intervenes directly, electing and calling Abraham, giving him a private revelation that *Fear and Trembling* portrays as being *infallible* and unwavering (SKS 4, 105, 113–18, 153, 172–83, 201–7 / FT, 9, 16–22, 59, 82–93, 113–20). However, in *Fear and Trembling*, this is a *hypothetical* assumption, which allows an examination of the consequences of such a revelation (Johansen, 1988: 100–1). But apart from this hypothetical (and idealized) case, Kierkegaard views our belief as being fallible and revisable (SKS 15, 130; Westphal, 1996: 119 and 2014: 192–5). And unlike Abraham's God, the God of Kierkegaard (and later Judaism) remains *hidden* (Fox-Muraton, 2012: 381). Finally, in *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham differs from all other humans by being entirely without guilt and sin. De silentio, therefore, writes,

> Up until now I have assiduously avoided any reference to the question of sin and its reality. The whole work is centered on Abraham … for Abraham did not become the single individual by way of sin – on the contrary, he was a righteous [*retfærdige*] man, God's chosen one. (SKS 4, 188, w. note / FT, 98–9, w. note, cp. SKS 7, 243–4 / CUP1, 268–9)

As "a devout and God-fearing man," Abraham is "worthy of being called God's chosen one" (SKS 4, 127 / FT, 31). As such, his motives coincide perfectly with God's will (SKS 4, 116–17, 127, 153 / FT, 20–1, 31, 59). It is only because of these unique features that Abraham is an exception whose individuality allegedly stands higher than the universal (*det Almene*), which represents common, natural standards such as natural law and morality that do not rely on divine revelation (Hampson, 2013: 38).[21]

These unique features bring us to the seventh point, namely that *Fear and Trembling* is warning directly against attempts to imitate Abraham by committing murder. Specifically, it attacks someone (a "sleepless" individual) who develops an unhealthy obsession with Abraham to the extent that he wants to imitate Abraham by murdering

[21] The ethical is repeatedly described as the universal (*det Almene*), a term with many different meanings:

1. Epistemically, it denotes natural human standards (e.g., natural law), which contrast with supernatural revelation (Hampson, 2013: 38).
2. Ethically, it is associated with universalism and general principles, not particularism.
3. Historically, it is associated with Kantian universalization of maxims and Hegel's concrete universal.
4. More loosely, it often denotes the rule (or even the ordinary), as opposed to the exception.

his own son (see SKS 4, 124–5 / FT, 28–9). This sleepless imitator was encouraged by a priest's praise of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. But the very same priest, nevertheless, goes on to denounce the imitator: "You despicable man, you scum of society, what devil so possessed you that you want to murder your son" (SKS 4, 124 / FT, 28). The moral of the story is that the obsessed imitator will probably be "executed or sent to the madhouse" (SKS 4, 125 / FT, 29; cp. Fremstedal, 2022: 118).

By contrast, the true religious believer (except for Abraham) is claimed to look like a tax collector (*Rodemester*) or merchant (*Kræmmersjæl*), not like itinerant geniuses (*landstygende Genier*) or a fly-by-night (*løse Fugle*, see SKS 4, 133–4, 167 / FT, 39, 75).[22] Unlike noisy sectarians, the true believer is a "witness" who is concerned with inwardness and character formation, not externalities (SKS 4, 170–1 / FT, 79–80).

Finally, in 1843 Kierkegaard himself was clear that "[t]he greatness of Abraham was not that he sacrificed Isaac, but that he believed, that he was glad and prepared" (Pap. IV, B 73, my trans.). Likewise, de silentio concludes, "[i]t is only by faith that one achieves any resemblance to Abraham, not by murder" (SKS 4, 126 / FT, 31). In 1846, Climacus points out that "the religious person's incognito … does not mean that his … is the actuality of a robber, a thief, a murderer," since legality is necessary (SKS 7,453n / CUP1, 500n). Legality here requires that acts are morally permissible (independently of their motivation or purity of will). The text then explicitly distances itself from Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* on the grounds that the latter is only a "rash anticipation" that gives the false impression that religiousness could be something finished and completed (SKS 7, 453–4n / CUP1, 500n). Thus viewed, Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* seems overly idealized, fictional, and impossible to imitate (see Rocca, 2002; cp. Eiríksson, 1850: esp. 78). Still, he represents the double movement of faith, which characterizes the attitude of faith more generally (see Section 1.1). There is a deep tension here between these general characteristics of faith and Abraham's unique features. Yet, the latter does not prevent him from having some general characteristics that are paradigmatic.

Later, in 1851, Kierkegaard concludes that Abraham himself came to realize that it would be "an error" to sacrifice Isaac, since it "was not God's will!" (SKS 24, 375, NB24:89 / KJN 8, 379; cp. Fox-Muraton,

[22] However, "*Rodemester*" could also be translated "public servant." Faith is also said to resemble bourgeois philistinism (*Spidsborgerlighed*) in its outward appearance (SKS 4, 133 / FT, 38).

2012: 30–1). By sacrificing a ram instead of Isaac, Abraham rejects the archaic tradition of child sacrifice, realizing that God does not demand *or* allow child sacrifice (Hösle, 1992: 18–19). The apparent requirement to sacrifice Isaac then represents divine irony that helps Abraham to reject the archaic tradition of child sacrifice (Jackson, 2010: 179–99).

2.4 Making Sense of the Teleological Suspension

Despite appearances, Kierkegaard does not accept religious immorality. Instead, religion requires ethics normatively. Kierkegaard therefore states, "[t]he religious sphere includes or ought to include the ethical" (SKS 15, 106 / BA, 21). It is for this reason that Kierkegaard repeatedly offers ethical criticism of religious views. For example, he attacks Christian eudaimonism for being egoistic and for seeing moral virtue as mere means to happiness (Fremstedal, 2022: 93–102). Moreover, *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* (1849) argues compellingly on ethical grounds against religious justifications of violence (SKS 11, 73–89 / WA, 68–85). Finally, we have seen that he contrasts the Judeo-Christian view that God is good and loving with the pagan view that he is a powerful tyrant (SKS 8, 364–5 / UD, 267–8). It is the latter view, not the former, that may support conflict between morality and religion, normatively *and* motivationally.

But what is the point of the teleological suspension then? How do we understand it? In his drafts for *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard himself is very clear that it "is not a collision between God's command and man's command but between God's commandment and God's commandment" (Pap. IV, B67 / JP 1, 908). Likewise, *Fear and Trembling* is clear that "[d]uty is simply [*Pligten er jo*] the expression of God's will" (SKS 4, 153 / FT, 60). Thus, God himself supports morality by forbidding murder while still requiring the sacrifice of Isaac, if only apparently (SKS 24, 375, NB24:89 / KJN 8, 379). There is no collision between ethics and religion but rather a collision *internal* to religious ethics, which is elsewhere described as "the ethico-religious." It is one *interpretation* of it that collides with another one, at least from the perspective of de silentio as a nonbeliever.[23]

[23] A more well-known passage also points in this direction:

> The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty towards God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I actually have no [special] duty towards God. The duty becomes duty by being traced back [*henføres*] to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God [directly]. For example, it is a duty to love one's neighbor. It is a duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty I enter into a relation not to God but to the neighbor I love. If in this connection

But instead of being a conflict between pagan and religious ethics, it is better seen as a conflict between archaic child sacrifice and the moral God, representing a paradigm shift from the former to the latter (something Kierkegaard is not explicit about unfortunately).

However, *Fear and Trembling* is explicit that "that which is suspended [in the teleological suspension] is not relinquished [*forskjærtset*] but is preserved [*bevaret*] in the higher, which is its τέλος" (SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54). Instead of negating ethical requirements, the teleological suspension then *preserves* and reaffirms ethics, giving it a new *telos*, which is explicitly described as "*evig … Salighed*," "eternal happiness," or "eternal salvation" (SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54). Elsewhere, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms repeatedly describe it as the "highest good," our final end, or "absolute telos" (SKS 7, 353–9, 388, 524 / CUP1, 387–94, 426–7, 502; SKS 9, 240–1 / WL, 239–40). But this good is moral, not amoral or immoral, and cannot possibly override or defeat moral requirements. For it represents a moral order, in which happiness is limited by moral virtue (see Sections 1.1 and 3.4).

In line with this, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* reads the teleological suspension as a Christian ethics that suspends pre-Christian ethics:

> The teleological suspension of the ethical must have an even more definite religious expression. The ethical is then present at every moment with its infinite requirement, but the individual is not capable of fulfilling it …. The suspension consists in the individual's finding himself in a state exactly opposite to what the ethical requires …. Duty is the absolute, its requirement the absolute, and yet the individual is prevented from fulfilling it …. The dreadful exemption from doing the ethical, the individual's heterogeneity with the ethical, this suspension from the ethical, is sin as a state in a human being. (SKS 7, 242–3 / CUP1, 266–7)

The ethical requirement remains in force by being valid (as an absolute requirement), even for Christians who fail to fulfill it. Instead of rejecting it, Christian ethics presuppose the ethical requirement but offers forgiveness and grace. Without divine grace, the moral requirement is but

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> I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, insomuch as "God" in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the Divine – that is, the universal, that is, the duty. (SKS 4, 160 / FT, 68)

The divine and God are here *identified* with the universal (*det Almene*) on one hand, and with the ethical and its duties on the other, indicating that the latter is divine, and that God is moral. However, this is not offered as a point about Jewish or Christian ethics but as a point about ethics that does not presuppose divine, supernatural revelation. Epistemically, the universal (*det Almene*) denotes natural, common human standards, including moral standards and natural law (Hampson, 2013: 38).

a relentless taskmaster that judges and condemns, not something that brings forth (SKS 4, 324 / CA, 16). Here Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms repeatedly claim that Christian conversion itself is motivated by, and presupposes, the preexisting moral problems of guilt, sin, and anguish (SKS 4, 323–31 / CA, 16–24; SKS 20, 69, NB:79 / KJN 4, 68; SKS 21, 285, NB10:55 / KJN 5, 296). As we will see in the next section, morality itself calls for grace and divine assistance on Kierkegaard's account.

In the passage previously quoted, the "teleological suspension" then represents Christian ethics of grace, which forgives sin. Here sin is a theological concept that represents Christian ethics, which supports, reaffirms, and reinterprets pre-Christian ethics by introducing grace and divine assistance (more generally). Such assistance is particularly decisive for the realization of the highest good, our "absolute telos," which exceeds human powers (see Section 3.4). Like divine grace, divine assistance then represents Judeo-Christian ethics and its supernatural revelation, which exceeds non-Christian ("first") ethics (Fremstedal, 2022: 125–6).

On the other hand, faith itself is "not an intellectual category but an ethical category [*Bestemmelse*] designating" the proper relationship between God and man (SKS 27, 616, Papir 486 / KJN 11.2, 318 and 320). Faith is therefore described in practical terms of trust, hope, and love (as virtues), rather than (mainly) as intellectual assent to (mere) doctrine (cp. Davenport, 2008). Faith itself, therefore, involves virtues and character traits that concern how to live morally (even though theological virtues cannot be reduced to cardinal virtues).

Finally, Kierkegaard maintains that Christianity "arranges everything ethically; all [humans are] alike, the ethical alone decides the difference" (SKS 25, 10, NB26:4 / KJN 9, 7):

> The ultimate standard [*sidste Maalestok*], which humans are rated according to, is the ethical, in comparison to which all differences (even that of being God's chosen one in an exceptional sense) are but an infinitesimal amount (SKS 15, 127, my trans.).

> The medium, the sole medium, through which God communicates with "humanity," the only thing he will talk about with humanity, is: the ethical. But in order to speak ethically of the ethical … it is necessary that everything else be absolutely relegated to the level of infinite unimportance. Stick to the point … that is, stick to the ethical. (SKS 25, 186, NB27:72 / KJN 9, 187)

Instead of being immoral or amoral, God is morally good and loving. Morality is therefore supported, not undermined, by God. Indeed, the only way to communicate with him is through the ethical as a medium

(SKS 25, 186, NB27:72 / KJN 9, 187), which must involve moral values and reasons (requirements). In 1847, Kierkegaard concludes, "in eternity there is an infinite silence in which the conscience speakers only with the single individual about whether he as an individual has done good or evil" (SKS 8, 227–8 / UD, 127–8, cp. SKS 11, 235 / SUD, 124). Despite the human tendency to suppress conscience, Kierkegaard goes on to insist that the individual "does not get rid of it; it is still his, or, rather he belongs to it … in eternity the conscience is the only voice heard … there is no place to escape it" (SKS 8, 228 / UD, 229). Like God, conscience is only concerned with "what he as a single individual has said and done and though – good or evil" (SKS 8, 229 / UD, 229). On this picture, morality is divinely supported. Like conscience, the ethical even represents our co-knowledge (*Samviden*, cp. *conscientia*) with God (SKS 7, 144 / CUP1, 155). Instead of representing just one of many different considerations, moral requirements have special importance and priority. As claimed by moral rationalism, moral requirements are *overall* requirements, which Kierkegaard take to be supported by a morally good and loving God. As such, these requirements *defeat* or override any conflicting consideration.

3 Moral Demandingness and Religious Ethics

3.1 Moral Demandingness

The previous section indicated that, for Kierkegaard, God reaffirms and supports ethics rather than undermining it. Specifically, non-Christian (natural) ethics is not rejected but rather reinforced and reinterpreted by (Judeo-)Christian ethics. The present section develops this reading by examining the first and second ethics in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), connecting both to contemporary debates on moral demandingness and the moral gap. On the one hand, the section shows how *The Concept of Anxiety* anticipates contemporary debates and remains relevant to contemporary concerns. On the other hand, it uses contemporary terms to interpret and clarify the central claims in *The Concept of Anxiety* by focusing on the relation between Christian and non-Christian ethics.

The Concept of Anxiety distinguishes systematically between two different forms of ethics. The *first ethics* is a non-Christian ethics that neither presupposes divine assistance nor Christian, supernatural revelation. The *second ethics*, by contrast, is a specifically Christian ethics that is based on divine assistance, grace, and supernatural revelation. *The Concept of Anxiety* then argues that the first ethics is so demanding that we inevitably fail to live up to its requirements. Unless we introduce divine assistance

and grace, which belong to the second ethics, the first ethics, therefore, fails by collapsing on its own terms (SKS 4, 323–31 / CA, 16–24).

These issues are relevant to two related contemporary discussions in ethics. The first concerns whether morality is highly or overly *demanding*. Specifically, does morality require significant *self-sacrifice*, which renounces self-interest, happiness, or desires, particularly for moral reasons (van Ackeren, 2018: 315)? Here self-sacrifice concerns (net) costs to the moral agent's self-interest or happiness (that are uncompensated, unless they bring unintended byproducts that offer some compensation).[24]

The second, related discussion concerns whether morality demands more than we are capable of by our own, unaided efforts. Does morality require so much of us that we inevitably fall short of its requirements, unless divine (or extra-human) assistance is introduced? Is there therefore a "moral gap" between what is morally required of us and our natural capabilities to live as morality requires, which calls for divine assistance? (Hare, 2002 [1996]). It is against this moral background that divine assistance is to be understood. Kierkegaard writes:

> the [ethical] requirement should indeed be stated, presented, and heard. From the Christian point of view, there ought to be no scaling down of the requirement, nor suppression of it—instead of a personal admission and confession. The requirement should be heard … so that I might learn … to resort to *grace* (SKS 12, 15 / PC, 7).

3.2 The First and Second Ethics and the Moral Gap

Unlike the contemporary discussion of moral demandingness (which initially focused on consequentialism), the discussion of the moral gap has focused on religious ethics. *The Moral Gap* by John Hare (2002 [1996]: 26, 37, 191) shows that Kant and Kierkegaard identify the moral gap between our moral requirements and our natural capabilities to live by these requirements.[25] However, Hare does not start with Kierkegaard's Christian ethics. Rather, he uses Kierkegaard to describe non-Christian ("first") ethics that does not rely on divine assistance. To Hare, it is particularly Judge William in *Either/Or* that offers a vivid description

[24] Also, morality could be demanding by involving great difficulties or confinement of acceptable options (van Ackeren, 2018: 330). However, I will focus on self-sacrifice here.

[25] Here Quinn (1998), Evans (2006 [2004]: 49, 82), and Stern (2014 [2012]: 206, 246–50) follow Hare (2002 [1996]). However, Hare moves from an exegesis of Kierkegaard to formulating an independent argument about the moral gap (2002 [1996]: 211). At a 2021 conference in Aix-en-Provence, he told the author that his book manuscript originally included several additional chapters on Kierkegaard that were removed before it got published. But even the published version includes many references to Kierkegaard.

(from within) of the moral life as it is, independent of divine assistance (2002 [1996]: 36–7). In Paul's terms, Judge William is "under law and not under grace," so that the "the ethical agent is forced to rely on her own strength" (2002 [1996]: 219).[26]

The "Introduction" to *The Concept of Anxiety* says that the first ethics shows the ideal as a task to be realized and presupposes that man possesses the necessary conditions. But human shortcomings, expressed by moral anguish and guilt, mean that the first ethics is shipwrecked since it fails to live up to its own standards (SKS 4, 324 / CA, 17).[27] Like the law for Paul, the first ethics is then a taskmaster that that judge instead of bringing forth (SKS 4, 324 / CA, 16). Hare comments:

> Kierkegaard is writing within the Lutheran tradition that "the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression" (Rom. 4: 15 NIV). Luther interprets this by saying, "For by the law comes, not righteousness, but knowledge of sin.["] (2002 [1996]: 205)

Like this tradition, Kierkegaard accepts the Augustinian dictum that "God bids us do what we cannot, that we may know what we ought to seek from him."[28] Despite appearances, this does not deny our ability to do God's will, only that we may do so by our own, unaided powers. By exceeding our natural capabilities, moral requirements, therefore, let us see our moral shortcomings and the need for divine assistance. Kierkegaard writes:

> From a Christian point of view, the emphasis is not nearly so much upon the extent to which one succeeds in discharging or fulfilling the [ethical] requirement, provided one does indeed strive, as upon the requirement manifesting itself to a person it its full infinitude, so that one properly learns to be humbled and to take refuge in grace.
>
> To reduce the requirement in order that one might be better to fulfill it (as if this was what was earnestness: so that now it could more easily be seen that one is earnest about wanting to fulfill the requirement) – is opposed by the innermost essence of [Christianity]. No – infinite humbling, and grace, and then the striving of thankfulness: this is [Christianity]. (SKS 24, 163–4, NB22:112 / KJN 8, 161–2)

[26] In the words of Climacus: "The ethicist in *Either/Or* had saved [*frelst*] himself" (SKS 7, 234 / CUP1, 257). Still, it seems possible to avoid the moral gap here if morality is lax and undemanding, see Section 7.

[27] Put differently, the ethical "requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt" (SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476; cp. SKS 7, 242–3 / CUP1, 266–7). However, note that unlike later writings, *The Concept of Anxiety* uses "sin" both for the moral guilt of the first ethics and for the specifically Christian sin before God of the second ethics. Here I try to distinguish between these two related concepts.

[28] Hare (2002 [1996]: 26) quoting Augustine, 1948: vol. i, 16 and 32.

3.3 Why Is Morality Demanding?

What makes morality so demanding, both motivationally *and* normatively, that divine assistance seems necessary? First, consider a broadly Aristotelean typology of moral character:

1) *Moral perfection*: the agent is moral by necessity, without any struggle or moral restraint, either because there are no conflicting motives or because such motives count for nothing.
2) *Enkrateia*: the agent has conflicting motives but succeeds in the moral struggle to let moral requirements override competing motives.
3) *Akrasia*: the agent has conflicting motives and allows moral requirements to be overridden by competing motives, at least occasionally.
4) *Depravity*: the agent lacks conflicting motives, since his understanding of moral requirements is so corrupted by his nonmoral motives that the former serves the latter.

First, moral requirements only make sense if there can be at least some conflicting motives, which represent enkrateia or akrasia. Second, unlike Aristotle, Kierkegaard thinks that the struggle of *enkrateia* is not the second best but the very best we can realistically achieve in this life. For him, moral development does not take the form of a "smooth flow of life," but rather takes the form of a *conversion* that radically challenges and changes existing ways of life.[29] At the very best, the agent then makes progress within *enkrateia*, by self-regulation and moral reform that fights and weakens competing motives so that these motives become less and less prevalent. But even if one were to somehow approximate moral perfection, this would represent an immense achievement that itself is extremely demanding and rare.[30]

A third (related) issue here is how to explain *competing motives*, especially *temptations*, that define enkrateia and akrasia alike. To Kierkegaard, these motives and temptations reflect the fact that we are both moral and sensuous agents with *character flaws* and weaknesses who are pulled in different directions psychologically (motivationally). For we could not even experience such temptations or conflict if we were morally perfect with moral characters that precluded all character flaws. It is precisely because we are not perfect morally that we are *susceptible* to temptation and motivational conflict. For temptation and conflict only become obstacles to

[29] See Cottingham (2009: 88) on Aristotelean versus Christian ethics.
[30] See SKS 9, 368 / WL, 375 on the contrast between moral perfection and enkrateia. Cp. Stern, 2014 [2012]: 218.

morality if we are not morally perfect but give some weight and consideration to competing motives instead so that they become temptations and hindrances to morality (Fremstedal, 2014a: 33–52). For perfects beings would not be tempted and hindered the least by any such motive. Indeed, there would not even be conceptual room for moral requirements without any competing motives. The problem, however, is not our sensuous nature but our moral imperfections and vices that allow moral requirements to be overridden by competing motives.

Four, the psychological analysis of *The Concept of Anxiety* shows how deeply intertangled our freedom is with anxiety and guilt. On this analysis, human freedom is accompanied by anxiety, in which we are anxious about doing anything wrong or bad. Worse still, such anxiety does not favor swift, courageous action but rather procrastination, hesitation, and passivity in which we give in to anxiety instead of acting. But by omitting and delaying moral action, anxiety leads not only to a subjective feeling of *guilt* but also to actual guilt over a sin of omission (SKS 4, 377–411 / CA, 73–109; SKS 7, 444–88 / CUP1, 490–537).[31]

Five, there are *specific* moral requirements that seem particularly demanding and difficult. Consider the duty to *love* all human beings without any distinction, including the requirement to love one's enemies. Or the duty to *forgive* all human beings, irrespective of their wrongdoings. Or just think of duties to aid and assist others by fighting poverty, slavery, inequality, and alienation.[32] Or consider cases of conflicting interests, in which moral impartiality conflicts with self-interest.[33] However, it is not just Christian ethics that is demanding here. For there is a continual tension between positive morality, which is less than perfect, and critical morality that calls for moral reform of society and individuals. But such reform is an endless task that itself is quite demanding, particularly against a starting point that is less than perfect (involving, e.g., slavery and corruption).

[31] For additional reasons to consider human agents less than morally perfect, including the suggestion that we understand immorality because we tend to be immoral ourselves, see SKS 4, 355 / CA, 50; SKS 7, 480–1 / CUP1, 528–9; SKS 9, 283–4 / WL, 285–6; Fremstedal, 2014a: ch. 2. In any case, Kierkegaard is less concerned with immoral acts than with moral character flaws and vices here.

[32] Kierkegaard takes inner change of character to precede social changes, writing: "Christ did not come in order to abolish slavery, even though that will follow and does result from it" (SKS 8, 342 / UD, 242).

[33] Instead of focusing on impartial consequentialism or utilitarianism, Kierkegaard stresses broadly Kantian ethics and virtue ethics instead (although he is not an Aristotelian by any stretch). See Fremstedal, 2014a: ch. 11.

Six – a more general point – morality is often demanding by requiring *self-sacrifice* (or self-denial). Familiar examples include the self-sacrifices of parents, friends, and caregivers. Other examples include donating money to charity and refusing to go along with immorality despite punishment.[34] However, to eliminate such self-sacrifice, we must *reconcile* moral requirements with personal happiness and self-interest in *all* cases, something that itself is extremely demanding, far exceeding human powers. To see this, we must turn to the concept of the highest good, which Kierkegaard shares with Kant.

3.4 The Highest Good: Virtue, Happiness, and the Church

The concept of the highest good, which is found in both Kant and Kierkegaard, supports and shows the moral gap quite systematically (Hare, 2002 [1996]: 69, 264; Fremstedal, 2014a: 118–19). First, the highest good requires full moral virtue. However, the problem here is not just that we are unable to eliminate character flaws (including vices and despair) entirely at present and in the future by our own, unaided powers, but also that past character flaws and immorality make us guilty so that we need forgiveness.

But it would be wrong to say that divine assistance is only relevant for moral perfection and divine forgiveness of immorality. For it is equally important to *justice* and *desert* that overcomes (normative) conflict between morality and personal happiness (which is pursued by prudence). Without it, prudence or self-interest could support immorality, whereas morality may require self-sacrifice. Both issues indicate that prudence and morality conflict normatively. Without a way to reconcile prudence and morality, our practical reason is then at odds with itself and unable to guide action, overall (since morality and prudence give conflicting requirements that cannot be resolved if we lack an overall verdict).[35] The problem here is not just that practical reason becomes incoherent but also that we lose justice or desert in which one's moral merits and virtues fit one's fate. Here *Fear and Trembling* claims,

> imperfection is the fundamental law of the external world, and here it happens again and again that he who does not work does get bread, and he who sleeps gets it even more abundantly than he who works … It is

[34] For the latter, see Kant's gallows case, Kant, 1900 and 1999: vol. v, 29–30.

[35] Since Sidgwick (1981 [1907]), this issue has been known as the "dualism of [the] practical reason." In Kant, it is known as "the antinomy of practical reason." For an analysis of this issue in Kierkegaard, see Fremstedal, 2014a: 124–25 and 2022: 81–91.

> different in the world of the spirit. Here an eternal divine order prevails. Here it does not rain on both the just and the unjust; here the sun does not shine on both good and evil. Here it holds true that only the one who works gets bread (SKS 4, 123 / FT, 27).

The relation between moral virtue and personal happiness is contingent in this life, but that is not how it should be, since moral justice and desert must condition and limit happiness on virtue (*or* on the acceptance of divine grace and infused theological virtues, alternatively) (SKS 4, 123, 156 / FT, 27, 63). Kierkegaard writes,

> [W]hat would be frightful would not be that I would suffer the punishment I deserved because I had done wrong, but what would be frightful would be if I or any pers[on] could be capable of doing wrong and there would be no one who punished it; and indeed what would be frightful would not be for me to awaken in anguish and horror, deceived in my heart, but rather that I or any pers[on] could deceive his heart in such a way that there would no longer be any power capable of awakening it … I will beseech you, O God, if I have acted wrongly, that your judgment will not grant me peace until I have realized my error; for what is important to me is not that I escape from your judgment, but that truth might prevail … I want to know it distinctly and clearly, whether in later times it will be to my shame – indeed, to my horror – or to my joy and reassurance [*Beroligelse*]. (SKS 18, 309–10, JJ:508 / KJN 2, 284–5)

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard concludes that "Christianity demonstrates, precisely from all the disapprobation [*Miskjendelse*] and persecution and wrong the truth must suffer, that justice must exist" (SKS 10, 122 / CD, 111; cp. SKS 8, 329 / UD, 228).[36] However, such moral justice lies beyond our human powers. Unlike God, we cannot know who is virtuous (or accepts divine grace) and what they deserve. Nor can we arrange everything in accord with moral desert or justice (or grace) so that morality is reconciled and synthesized with happiness in the highest good as a moral order or moral world (Fremstedal, 2014a: 121–2).

A final issue here concerns the *social* and ecclesiastical aspects of ethico-religious agency. Specifically, it concerns the realization of a universal ethical commonwealth that unites and coordinates *all* moral agents, something that is known as the church or the kingdom of God in the Christian tradition (Glenn, 1997). But this requires collective action and coordination that far exceeds the abilities of any individual agent, especially if

[36] Here truth represents the right ethico-religious way of life, rather than mere doctrine or propositions, see SKS 12, 202 / PC, 205.

past and future generations are to be included. Again, divine assistance seems necessary here (even for the *church invisible*).[37] On this broadly Augustinian-Kantian picture, ethico-religious agency belongs to, and is embedded in, society and history. Overcoming immorality then requires not just individual effort but an ethical commonwealth that counteracts immorality by working together to establish social conditions that allow all to improve morally (Fremstedal, 2014a: 107–8). Hare explains,

> we will have ends which require the help of others if we are going to reach them …. We are linked together by our needs and abilities into a single unit, or kingdom, which we must be prepared to will into existence as a whole. It contains our needs (for even in the true church we will be creatures of need), and it contains other people with the developed abilities to meet our needs; but it also contains the needs of others, and our developed abilities to meet their needs. (2002 [1996]: 264–5)

But as Beiser points out:

> [I]ndividual efforts of finite human beings are not by themselves sufficient to bring about a collective result. We do not have reason to believe that others will share our goals; and even if they do and we succeed in coordinating all our efforts, there is no reason to think that our efforts will succeed or last for long. There are too many contingencies in life and nature that might foil our best efforts. (2006: 602–3)

Like Kant, Kierkegaard uses the concept of the highest good here both for the kingdom of God and for the synthesis of morality and happiness. In both signed and pseudonymous writings alike, Kierkegaard repeatedly describes our final end, the "absolute telos," as "eternal happiness," identifying it with the "highest good" (SKS 7, 353–9, 388, 524 / CUP1, 387–94, 426–7, 502; SKS 9, 240–1 / WL, 239–40), a key concept in the eudaimonistic tradition that Kant reinterprets by distinguishing more sharply between virtue and happiness. However, in the Kierkegaard literature, the highest good is best known as "*evig Salighed*," which is usually translated as "eternal happiness" or "eternal salvation." This reflects the fact that a full realization of the highest good, which includes all agents, transcends human history and requires personal immortality and eschatology (Fremstedal, 2014a: 94–128).

To undermine the highest good, one need only undermine *one* of its constitutive elements. Thus, undermining either virtue, or happiness, or

[37] See Fremstedal, 2014a: 94–145, 180 discussing SKS 5, 255 / EUD, 258–9; SKS 7, 356 / CUP1, 391; SKS 8, 303–4 / UD, 208–9; SKS 8, 306 / UD, 212; SKS 10, 65 / CD, 56; SKS 24, 324, NB24:7 / KJN 8, 326 [JP 1, 600].

the universal ethical commonwealth suffices to undercut it as a whole. Strictly speaking, a single case would be enough (e.g., someone excluded from the ethical commonwealth). But this means that the realization of the highest good is extremely demanding and far beyond individual, human powers. Still, it is not just moral shortcoming, guilt, and sin that are the problem here (although they are the problems that have received most attention in the Kierkegaard literature). Indeed, the famous account of religion in *Fear and Trembling* largely abstracts from moral shortcoming, guilt, and sin. For the accounts of Abraham and "the double movement of faith" are independent of moral guilt and sin (SKS 4, 188 / FT, 98–9; SKS 7, 243–4 / CUP1, 268–9). Instead, the focus is on our *telos*, which is explicitly described as "*evig … Salighed*," "eternal happiness," or "eternal salvation (SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54). Put differently, our final end is the realization of the highest good, which unites morality and happiness in an ethico-religious commonwealth. Still, we will discuss briefly the alternatives to this framework (and the moral gap) in Section 7 (for those who reject it).

4 Moral Reasons for Religious Belief? The Ethics of Belief

4.1 The Ethics of Belief: Evidence and Belief

Whereas previous sections discussed religious support for ethics, the present section considers practical reasons for religious belief.[38] It is argued that Kierkegaard sketches practical (moral and prudential) reasons for religious belief (faith), although he never offers a fully developed pragmatic argument for belief. Instead of basing belief on epistemic evidence, he (Climacus) describes it as "*objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness*" (SKS 7, 186–7 / CUP1, 203).

I argue that Kierkegaard is concerned with the *ethics of belief* here, which concerns what we *should* believe, particularly if we lack sufficient epistemic evidence, certainty, or knowledge that justifies belief epistemically.[39] Here (strict) evidentialism concerning belief takes justified (rational) belief to require sufficient epistemic evidence. In the famous

[38] Again, the Danish "*Tro*" includes both (religious) faith and belief more generally. Similarly, cognition (Danish, *Erkjendelse*; German, *Erkenntnis*) covers both belief and knowledge, although cognition is sometimes conflated with knowledge by translations (see, e.g., SKS 17, 24–6, AA:12 / KJN 1, 19–21).

[39] More broadly construed, the ethics of belief concerns how beliefs should be formed, maintained, and relinquished, see Chignell, 2018. I have drawn on Fremstedal, 2019, 2022; Quanbeck, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c in this section.

words of Clifford: "[I]t is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence" (1876–1877: 295).

By contrast, pragmatism regarding belief holds that normative practical reasons can justify belief if sufficient epistemic evidence is lacking.[40] Such belief, which is normally based on prudential or moral reasons, is often called *practical belief* or moral belief. We will see that it is exactly such a belief that Kierkegaard seems to advocate.

Even though this debate concerns justified (rational) belief more generally, it is of particular importance to justified *religious* belief (faith). Peter Forrest (2021) therefore remarks, "[c]ontemporary epistemology of religion may conveniently be treated as a debate over whether *evidentialism* applies to religious beliefs, or whether we should instead adopt a more permissive epistemology." Typically, evidentialism supports the "agnostic imperative" to suspend "belief whenever the evidence is insufficient" (Jordan, 2022). Pragmatism, by contrast, supports belief beyond the evidence, if we have practical reason to believe.

Like Kant, Kierkegaard (Climacus) contrasts belief (*Tro*) and knowledge (*Viden*) in this context (SKS 7, 36 / CUP1, 29). Both thinkers deny knowledge to make room for belief, rejecting the assumption that belief is less important and valuable than knowledge is. To both, *knowledge* requires sufficient (epistemic) evidence, which warrants (rational and psychological) certainty epistemically. But mere (justified) belief, by contrast, requires a *lack* of evidence for *and* against belief, which in turn allows normative practical reason to believe (Fremstedal, 2022: 183–4).[41] It is against this background that belief (*Tro*, faith) confronts epistemic, "*objective uncertainty*" and risk (of error) with the "*most passionate inwardness*" (SKS 7, 186–7 / CUP1, 203).

4.2 Epistemic Considerations Need Practical Ones

Kierkegaard makes a good case that epistemic considerations cannot be self-sufficient, since other considerations are needed for starting and

[40] For simplicity, I will here focus on pragmatism and (strict) evidentialism regarding belief. Two further options are fideism and conservatism regarding belief. Fideism takes (at least some) beliefs to justify themselves or to be self-constituting, whereas conservatism takes traditional, inherited beliefs to be justified (unless defeated). However, in the Kierkegaard literature fideism is often not delimited sharply from competing views such as pragmatism. Finally, the term "fideism" has become quite contested recently because it is often used anachronistically and pejoratively in order to attack many different views that contrast faith and reason in various ways. See Fremstedal, 2022: ch. 13.

[41] Knowledge is then not identical to justified true belief. For knowledge requires sufficient evidence, which is *in*compatible with belief on this account.

stopping inquiry, as well as to tackle epistemic risk. First, it is practical considerations, rather than merely epistemic ones, that decide whether specific questions should be raised and investigated to begin with. Particularly, we must consider if something is important, significant, valuable, or of interest to us. But this requires practical considerations (and reasons), not just epistemic ones. Thus,

> *whether* one ought to initially take an interest in the [epistemic] question of whether *p* – and thereby adopt any doxastic attitude at all regarding *p* – falls outside of the scope of epistemic rationality and is determined only by practical norms. One is only subject to epistemic norms – governing which doxastic attitude one ought to have – with respect to propositions in which one [already] has an interest. Consequently, practical norms that determine whether one ought to have any doxastic attitude at all regarding *p* cannot conflict with epistemic rationality. (Quanbeck, 2024a: 255–6)

It is not evidence, but rather practical considerations (including practical reasons), that justify and motivate inquiry and doxastic attitudes to begin with.

Second, we also need practical considerations to *close* inquiry. Instead of stopping by itself, inquiry can go on forever, without ever attaining perfect evidence that rules out future inquiry, reconsideration, or fallibility (or warrants apodictic certainty and definite knowledge that cannot be contested).[42] Inquiry can then extend forever, without ever reaching conclusive *evidence* (or counterevidence) that settles the matter definitively solely on epistemic grounds. For inquiry (and epistemic considerations) seem open ended and never ending, unless stopped externally by practical considerations. The same holds true for reflection, doubt, and deliberation (cp. SKS 3, 203–5, 330–2 / EO2, 211–13, 351–4; SKS 5, 137–40 / EUD, 134–7; SKS 7, 109–10 / CUP1, 112–13; SKS 13, 91–2 / FSE, 69–70; SKS 16, 237–8 / JFY, 190–2; SKS 20, 79–80, NB:102/ KJN 4, 78).

Still, belief may nevertheless *approximate* certainty and knowledge sometimes (SKS 7, 30–4, 81 / CUP1, 23–6, 81). But this certainty is hardly attained or secured fully at any point in time by inquiry. Rather, inquiry represents a never-ending progression toward a regulative idea that remains transcendent. Therefore, we need practical considerations

[42] Like Kierkegaard (Climacus), Quanbeck (2024a) distinguishes between contingent and necessary propositions here. The former allow (historical) belief, whereas the latter support knowledge and apodictic certainty, at least in principle. The previous point then applies mainly to contingent propositions (even though complications do exist that cannot be discussed adequately here).

(rather than merely epistemic ones) to stop inquiry (just as we need practical considerations to start inquiry):

> [Because] continuing to inquire about contingent propositions … is always epistemically permissible, practical requirements to continue inquiring never conflict with theoretical reason. Practical requirements to close inquiry, by contrast, can – but do not necessarily – conflict with theoretical reason (depending on whether suspending judgment is epistemically required in a particular case) (Quanbeck, 2024a: 257).

Third, epistemic and evidential requirements seem affected by practical stakes. Many would raise these requirements if much were at stake practically. For example, the use of death penalty calls for far stronger evidence than what is needed for giving a small fine or just a warning. Therefore, the former has a higher evidential *threshold* than the latter has. But this widespread approach runs into problems if the stakes are raised so much that the evidential threshold cannot be met. And that is exactly what Kierkegaard (Climacus) claims, using the central case of infinite interest in eternal happiness as the highest good.[43] Here the stakes are maximally high, but there is no available evidence that could possibly match it and be sufficient for belief (SKS 7, 30–4 / CUP1, 23–6). Instead, there is a *mismatch* between evidence and stakes that makes the evidence insufficient. But this is just the opposite of what we find in the legal case above.

Either way, practical considerations influence how much evidence is required (Fremstedal, 2019: 739), something that is known as pragmatic (and moral) encroachment. To avoid error at all costs, skeptics suspend belief (SKS 4, 281–2 / PF, 82–3), unlike pragmatists (concerning belief) who accept epistemic risk in order to gain truth (James, 1956 [1897]).[44] Kierkegaard writes:

> We human beings have a natural fear of making a mistake—by thinking too well of another person [*ved at troe for godt om et Menneske*]. On the other hand, the error of thinking too ill of another person [*Den Vildfarelse derimod at troe for ondt om et andet Menneske*] is perhaps not feared, or at least not in proportion [*Forhold*] to the first. But then we do not fear most to be in error, then we are still in error by having a one-sided fear of a certain kind of error. (SKS 9, 233–4 / WL, 232)

[43] See Section 3.4 on the moral importance of the highest good, which realizes moral perfection and happiness in an ethical commonwealth or church.

[44] Like skepticism, evidentialism suspend belief to avoid error here, something that means that it risks losing truth (see Jordan, 2022 on James, 1956 [1897]). For Kierkegaard's proto-pragmatism (practical non-evidentialism) regarding belief and the twin aim of believing truth and avoiding error, see Emmanuel, 1996: ch. 3; Ferreira, 2001: 142; Fremstedal, 2022: ch. 13; Quanbeck, 2024a: 245, note 27.

Such interpersonal cases indicate that, like trust and hope, belief in others cannot be based on sufficient or conclusive evidence. Rather, social interaction requires a charitable interpretation of others that believe and hope for the best for others, despite epistemic uncertainty (or even some, inconclusive counter evidence). This is related to the fact that our attitude toward others affects their performance and attitude toward us. Believing in others and trusting them has a very different effect from disbelieving and distrusting them, even though both attitudes can be based on the very same inconclusive evidence and uncertainty (Lippitt, 2015: 139–40). Thus, meeting others with disbelief and distrust (until they have *proved* trustworthy) will typically affect their performance and our relation far worse than trusting and believing in them (Fremstedal, 2019: 734–5). It therefore seems that we have practical reason to believe in others and to be charitable toward them (at least within reason). Here Kierkegaard anticipates James' (1956 [1897]: 24) key point that social trust and interaction cannot be based on sufficient evidence but require practical reasons instead.

Yet (strict) evidentialism must suspend belief whenever the evidence is insufficient, to avoid error. But it then risks losing truth and any benefit (good) associated with it, whereas pragmatism risks "error for chance at truth" and any associated benefit (Fremstedal, 2019: 736; Jordan, 2022). As such, pragmatism and evidentialism take different attitudes toward epistemic *risk*, which concerns the twin epistemic goals of believing truth and avoiding error.

Finally, evidentialism and pragmatism differ on what constitutes direct reasons for and against belief. Specifically, do practical reasons constitute direct reason for belief, or is it only epistemic evidence that constitutes such reason? (see Section 4.3). Practical considerations then affect the justification of beliefs as follows:

(1) by affecting the attitude we ought to adopt toward epistemic risk;
(2) by constituting reasons for or against inquiring (and thereby reasons for or against suspending judgment); and
(3) by directly constituting reasons for or against belief. (Quanbeck, 2024a: 249)

4.3 Practical (Moral) Reasons for Belief?

Like Kant, Kierkegaard takes our cognition to be finite and limited, denying evidence (and knowledge) of God, immorality, and the supernatural *as such* (Green, 1992: 121–46; Lippitt, 2015: 139; Fremstedal,

2022: 151–2).[45] The infinite, for instance, can only be known as finite, not as truly infinite. Similarly, immortality cannot be known or experienced directly in this life. And any attempt to know the supernatural with ordinary naturalistic (scientific) methods is bound to fail. Still, the decisive point here is not the details but the fact that there are principled limitations on our cognitive and rational powers epistemically such that there is something which we cannot have sufficient evidence (or knowledge) about.[46]

To be justified or rational, beliefs need justification. For we are responsible not only for our acts but also for our beliefs (cp. SKS 17, 271–2, DD:180 / KJN 1, 262). Indeed, forming beliefs represents a type of act (Jordan, 2022; Fremstedal, 2022: 176–7). Therefore, we may ask for *reasons* that justify belief (SKS 18, 212, JJ:225 / KJN 2, 195; cp. SKS 7, 31–50 / CUP1, 24–44). Indeed, Kierkegaard himself even speaks approvingly of an *argument for religious belief* (in immortality) (SKS 20, 289, NB4:5 / CD, 378). But instead of developing an elaborate argument, he mainly offers suggestions that typically contrast faith with despair (SKS 7, 183n / CUP1, 200n; SKS 11, 195–6 / SUD, 81).[47]

Interestingly, Kierkegaard's approach here seems to anticipate later discussion of the pointless universe. Consider this famous description of the purposeless world of science by Bertrand Russell:

> That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms …. all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins …. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. (1985 [1903]: 66–7)

[45] Kierkegaard quotes Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, see SKS 18, 198, JJ:179 / KJN 2, 182–3; SKS K18, 312. SKS K18 is a commentary volume that accompanies SKS 18.

[46] Still, the doctrinal or propositional content of religious belief is subject to rational assessment (SKS 15, 216–26 / BA, 176–87; SKS 23, 69, NB15:97 / KJN 7, 67). To prevent nonsensical and absurd beliefs, a rational examination of the content of belief is called for (SKS 23, 69, NB15:97 / KJN 7, 67). In his response to Eiríksson (1850), Kierkegaard is clear that belief is only absurd to nonbelievers who take offense at it. See Pap. X–6, B68, 75 / JP 6, 6598, 301; Pap. X–6, B79, 85 / JP 1, 10; Fremstedal, 2022: chs. 11–12.

[47] *The Sickness unto Death* offers an elaborate analysis of despair, which indicates that faith overcomes despair. This looks more like a negative argument against the alternatives to faith than a direct argument for faith. Other examples include the God-postulate in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (SKS 7, 183n / CUP1, 200n) and the "new argument" for immortality in *Christian Discourses* (SKS 10, 211–21 / CD, 202–13; SKS 20, 289, NB4:5 / CD, 378).

Compare with this passage from *Fear and Trembling*:

> If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying [*til Grund for*] everything there were only a wild, fermenting power [*Magt*] that writhing in dark [*dunkle*] passions produced everything … if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage … how empty and devoid of consolation would life be! But precisely for that reason it is not so. (SKS 4, 112 / FT, 15)

Like Russell later, Kierkegaard (de silentio) here describes *despair in a purposeless*, naturalistic world. To Russell, this world represents truth. But to Kierkegaard (de silentio) it merely represents a *hypothetical* assumption that is rejected in a practical *reductio* as being absurd. Specifically, the "reason" why life is not considered "empty and devoid of consolation" is that on this assumption, life would only be "despair" (SKS 4, 112 / FT, 15).

But exactly why should we contrast faith with despair here? In addition to the previous contrast between "emptiness" and "sacred bond that knit humankind together," we have seen that the text offers the following contrast:

> [I]mperfection is the fundamental law of the external world, and here it happens again and again that he who does not work does get bread, and he who sleeps gets it even more abundantly than he who works … It is different in the world of the spirit. Here an eternal divine order prevails …. only the one who works gets bread (SKS 4, 123 / FT, 27).

The "world of spirit" is a *moral order* in which moral justice and desert condition happiness on moral virtue (SKS 4, 123, 156 / FT, 27, 63). Elsewhere, it is described as the kingdom of God (SKS 8, 303–6 / UD 207–11), the highest good, and as eternal happiness in which there is a necessary, purposive connection between virtue and happiness (Fremstedal, 2014a: 76–145 and 2022: 76–120). The "visible world," by contrast, lacks such a necessary, purposive connection that secures justice and desert. It may at the very best allow some limited overlap between virtue and happiness that is merely *incidental*, unintended, and purposeless. But all too often, the result is just the opposite, namely that vice overlaps with happiness and virtue with unhappiness. In such cases, moral virtue becomes *demanding* and *self-sacrificial*, whereas vice may pay off.

Such (contingent) conflict between morality and happiness threatens and undermines the very *coherence* of practical reason: One the one hand,

prudence aims at – and promotes – personal happiness. But on the other hand, morality may require self-sacrifice that renounces and undermines the very same happiness (Evans and Baggett, 2022: part VI). In such cases, practical reason seems *divided* against itself, and thus unable to guide action overall, something that is known as an (incoherent) dualism of practical reason (Sidgwick, 1981 [1907]).

But how can it then be normatively required overall to be moral or prudent? To offer an overall verdict, all-things-considered, we must either *reconcile* morality and prudence normatively, or – as a second best – let one override the other normatively. The former would be best since morality with happiness is far better than morality without it (not at least because it avoids self-sacrifice and an incoherent dualism of practical reason). But such a reconciliation of morality and prudence is extremely demanding if it is to cover *all* cases. For the prudential good of happiness must then be conditioned on and limited by virtue in all cases. On the one hand, this seems to require immortality or eschatology. On the other, we will see a Kantian argument that it requires nothing short of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect moral goodness (see Section 7). And even if that were possible, there are separate reasons why this is impossible to prevent all conflict between morality and prudence within human history (see Fremstedal, 2014a: chs. 4–10). Thus, any attempt to reconcile morality and prudence must be supplemented by the second approach. Here Kierkegaard is clear that moral requirements should defeat or override competing reasons.

Still, it makes a great difference if morality is supported by prudence and by practical reason, or if it conflicts with both. Irwin writes:

> Without [the highest good as our final end], we cannot say how observance of morality fits our other reasonable aims [notably prudence that aims at personal happiness]; though we still recognize that it is reasonable in itself, we are less strongly committed to it than we would be if we saw how it fits our other reasonable aims. We have a further reason and motive for observing the moral law if we grasp its contribution to the highest good. Conversely, if we doubt whether we really promote the highest good by observing the moral law, we lose a reasons and motive that we would … have if we had no such doubts. (Irwin, 2011: vol. iii, 138)

The highest good reconciles morality and prudence so that our lives become more integrated and less conflicted. Instead of conflicting, moral and prudential reasons would then support each other reciprocally. Specifically, prudence has reason to avoid conflict where morality

threatens prudence. Likewise, morality has reason to avoid conflict where prudence threatens morality. Finally, the highest good supports not only moral justice and desert but also practical reason itself, which becomes coherent (Fremstedal, 2022: 101–2). Thus, the highest good seems supported by prudence, morality, and practical reason, overall.

If this sketched argument is sound, there cannot be any more weighty practical reason than this. Therefore, such a moral argument seems particularly well-suited for practical reasons for religious belief. For as we have seen (in Section 3), the highest good lies far beyond individual, human powers. Unlike God, we cannot reconcile morality with happiness by systematically conditioning and limiting happiness on virtue. Nor can we know who is truly virtuous and exactly what they deserve (Fremstedal, 2014a: 121–2). The realization of the highest good then calls for divine agency rather than merely human agency. Without it, we would be unable to bridge the moral gap between our natural capabilities and our moral duty to promote the highest good (Hare, 2002 [1996]; Fremstedal, 2022: 245). Worse still, without the highest good, morality cannot be reconciled with prudence or with practical reason. Like practical reason, we would then be deeply conflicted or divided against ourselves, something Kierkegaard describes in terms of *doublemindedness* and despair that fails to reconcile ideals with reality.

Even though this brief *reconstruction* of a *moral argument* along broadly Kantian lines abstracts from many issues, it nevertheless shows how we could have decisive practical reason to believe. The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. We have neither (decisive) epistemic evidence for nor against religious belief, due to our cognitive limitations.
2. The alternative to such belief is incoherence, in which our practical reason is divided against itself.
3. Therefore, such belief is normatively required to secure coherence.

Beliefs are not *required* practically despite being forbidden epistemically. Rather, beliefs are *permitted* epistemically, while practical reasons (and practical considerations more generally) narrow down the options, thereby offering an overall verdict.[48] Unlike strict evidentialism, such

[48] This view is known as epistemic permissivism, see Quanbeck, 2024a. On a broadly Kantian view of cognitive limitations, we cannot possibly have decisive epistemic evidence in many matters of religion and ethics. Thus, the contrast between practical and epistemic considerations is shown particularly strongly here because belief seems required practically, despite the lack of decisive epistemic evidence. But in other contexts (e.g., scientific and everyday ones), the contrast between the two considerations seems less sharp (since belief may not be required and evidence may not be absent necessarily).

pragmatism regarding belief does not take decisive (sufficient) epistemic evidence to be necessary for all justified beliefs. But it is nevertheless compatible with the weak evidentialist view that such evidence would, if given, warrant belief, which cannot be overridden by other reasons. Finally, such pragmatism does not itself require doxastic voluntarism, which takes our beliefs to be controlled directly by our will. Rather, it only requires an indirect control over our beliefs (Jordan, 2022: part vii).[49]

4.4 Closing Discussion

The pragmatic, moral argument above abstracts from many issues to show how practical reasons may support belief. However, there is a deep tension between such pragmatic argument and Kierkegaard's Christian view. For it is not clear that such pragmatic arguments could suffice for Christian faith. For the latter requires divine revelation, something the former does not. Indeed, the former may represent natural theology, not Christian revelation. In Kierkegaard's words, such pragmatic arguments are based on "the human," not on Christian revelation (SKS 25, 476, NB30:112 / KJN 9, 482–3). Specifically, practical reasons for religious belief belong to the first ethics, not Christian ethics.

But it nevertheless seems that *if* divine revelation is given, as Kierkegaard claims, then there is a role for pragmatic arguments. Confronted with revelation, pragmatic arguments could (at best) *support* religious belief. God's existence is then not just something we postulate, but rather a fact we have reason to believe in (Green, 2011: 128–45; Fremstedal, 2014a: 132). And even if Christian faith solves pre-Christian problems, it cannot

[49] Kierkegaard is typically taken to represent this weaker, indirect doxastic voluntarism, but Quanbeck (2024b) argues that he develops a stronger view in which the will can direct control permissible beliefs (not all beliefs). In any case, I have here taken evidence in a *narrow* sense that concerns mere *epistemic, intellectual, justification* of belief (as opposed to normative practical reasons that justifies acts or character traits). This narrow use of "evidence" contrasts with a wider use, in which evidence is anything that makes *truth evident* (see Evans, 2010: 4, 44–5, 151, 169–71). Moral reasons, notably, could make moral truth evident. For example, moral reasons to respect the worth and value of persons could make some moral truth (and value) evident. As such, moral reasons could represent evidence in this wide sense (but not in the narrow sense that concerns mere epistemic, intellectual justification as opposed to practical reasons). Thus viewed, it is not just epistemic reasons but also practical and moral ones that may make truth evident. But this undercuts the sharp divide between evidentialism and pragmatism concerning belief, suggesting that practical reasons are epistemically important. But the issue here is really whether we define evidence in terms of epistemic *justification* (as I have done) or in terms of *truth* instead (see Evans, 2010: 151, 169–71). Sometimes these come apart. For the best available evidence need not always offer us the whole truth. But neither must indications of truth offer conclusive evidence that justifies belief. Often, they are much weaker than this, by having some force, at least for some agents (Evans, 2010).

be reduced to pre-Christian, natural standards, since divine revelation must differ from these standards.

To Kierkegaard, sin-consciousness provides decisive reason (*Grund*) for Christian faith (SKS 21, 163, NB8:39 / KJN 5, 170), enabling the reception of divine revelation (SKS 4, 222, 269–70, 290–301 / PF, 13, 68–70, 93–104). Other reasons, by comparison, merely remove hindrances to faith and thereby prepare Christian conversion (SKS 22, 108–9, NB11:179 / KJN 6, 105–6).[50] Particularly important here is anguish and guilt-consciousness that anticipates and motivates conversion (SKS 20, 69, NB:79 / KJN 4, 68; SKS 21, 285, NB10:55 / KJN 5, 296; Fremstedal, 2022: 248). For Christians, sin-consciousness presupposes and builds on pre-Christian guilt-consciousness, just as the non-Christian, first ethics provide the background for Christian ethics (SKS 4, 323–31 / CA, 16–24).

But how do these relate? Here guilt-consciousness does not concern guilt over specific acts, but rather awareness of personal character flaws (vices) morally that – in turn – allow immoral acts (SKS 7, 481 / CUP1, 529–30; SKS 8, 380–1 / UD, 285–6; SKS 11, 218–20 / SUD, 106–8). Much the same is the case with sin-consciousness, except that sin is always sin before God as supernaturally revealed (particularly by Christ who represents moral perfection that contrasts clearly with our sinfulness). Sin then offers a specific Christian take on moral guilt, that – unlike mere guilt – requires divine revelation (SKS 7, 483–5 / CUP1, 532–4; SKS 11, 196–213 / SUD, 83–101; SKS 23, 100, NB16:6 / KJN 7, 100). Still, sin-consciousness must build on and *presuppose* pre-Christian guilt-consciousness and despair, offering a specifically Christian take on it. Therefore, Christian conversion requires an "anguished conscience" that is aware of personal moral guilt (SKS 20, 69, NB:79 / KJN 4, 68; SKS 21, 285, NB10:55 / KJN 5, 296). Thus, guilt-consciousness must precede sin-consciousness.

Christian ethics redescribes guilt *as* sin. Still, sin differs from mere guilt or mere immorality. Unlike guilt and immorality, sin is always sin before God as revealed in Christianity. And one is not so much a sinner because of mere immorality but rather because one is not justified by the grace of God. Not even good acts can change sinners into justified Christians, unless divine grace is introduced. Indeed, even good acts are sinful insofar as they belong – and are attributed – to sinners. Still, it is *only* with respect to divine salvation and without divine grace that our nature is

[50] Evans (2010: 11) argues that the main goal of natural theology "may be simply to make belief in God a 'live option'" (in sense of James, 1956 [1897]) by removing intellectual hindrances to faith. This (general) point about natural theology seems to fit Kierkegaard neatly.

deficient (Dalferth, 2023: 123, 213 note 97). In other respects, our nature and agency need *not* be deficient or lacking (something that is rarely noted in the Kierkegaard literature). This, however, suggests that the decisive reason for faith concerns the need for salvation and grace, which again requires that one identifies as a sinner who needs God.

In any case, the moral argument in Section 4.3 is internally connected to questions of moral guilt.[51] For immorality fails to acknowledge and respect moral restrictions, particularly as they apply to prudence or self-interest. Instead of letting moral requirements override nonmoral reasons, immorality then lets competing motives override moral requirements. In cases of conflict, this involves an *inverted*, perverse ranking of reasons, which warrants moral guilt and blame (although such blame should be directed toward oneself rather than others, on Kierkegaard's view). This holds just as much for the first ethics as for the second ethics (even though the latter redescribes guilt *as* sin).

Finally, we might ask if the benefits associated with religious belief are dependent on its *truth* or not? And are they *premortem or postmortem* benefits? (answers to these two questions tend to overlap here). The following postmortem benefits seem *truth dependent*:[52] The full realization of the highest good of the kingdom of God, including personal salvation and immortality, would be impossible without divine assistance. But the following premortem benefits seem partially truth independent: Psychological benefits of religious faith, hope, and love that handle hardship and avoid despair and demoralization, arguably by being Christian virtues of character. Yet this cannot really be the full story. For these virtues are supposed to be infused virtues that require divine assistance and grace, according to Kierkegaard and the Christian tradition he belongs to (Roberts, 2022). So, without such assistance and grace, these virtues cannot be infused or acquired at all (except as mere simulacra). Worse still, even if acquired, these virtues do not promise prosperity but rather require some self-sacrifice (or even martyrdom), according to Kierkegaard. However, to the extent that it does succeed in making a difference for the better morally and religiously (something that can hardly be known), it allows some moral progress toward the highest good, without ever reaching it definitely in this life.

[51] For the systematic connections between immorality and the highest good, see Fremstedal, 2014a.

[52] In the normal sense of the word truth. In the special sense of Kierkegaard's subjective truth (which concerns truthful living, not true propositions) perhaps not. See Fremstedal, 2022: 158–69 for a discussion.

5 The Good and the Divine: Metaethics, Realism, and God's Command

5.1 The Euthyphro Dilemma, Subjectivism, and Theological Voluntarism

The following section discusses Kierkegaard's metaethical views. It starts with the Euthyphro dilemma, which poses problems for theological voluntarism and subjectivism alike. It then turns to moral (and evaluative) realism as an alternative. Finally, it considers accounts that combine moral realism with divine commands.

To understand the relation between moral goodness and God, consider the Euthyphro dilemma:

> [First horn:] Is something good (valuable) just because someone values it, *or*
>
> [second horn:] is it to be valued just because it is already independently good (valuable)? (cp. SKS 19, 408, Not13:43 / KJN 3, 406).

On the first horn, something is good only to the extent that it is conferred value on, either by us (*subjectivism*) or by God (*theological voluntarism*).[53] On the second horn, the good is to be valued because it is antecedently good (*realism*). In the Kierkegaard literature, all these views are represented (as well as some intermediary views). Subjectivist views are typically represented by various aesthetes and existentialist readings of Kierkegaard.[54] Theological voluntarist views, by contrast, tend to see Kierkegaard as a Lutheran nominalist metaethically, while realist readings emphasize Kierkegaard's Christian Platonism instead.[55] Here we will start by discussing shared problems with subjectivism and theological voluntarism (the first horn), before we consider realism (the second horn).[56]

[53] Any subjective pro-attitude (e.g., desires, loves, likes, and volitions) that confers or generates value will do here (including negative attitudes that confers negative value). I draw on Fremstedal, 2014a, 2022, here as well as Portmore, 2021.

[54] For subjectivism, see Høffding, 1919: 103–7. See also Dreyfus (2008: 16–17) on unconditional commitment to *any* cause and MacIntyre (2013 [1984]: 47–67) on the "criterionless fundamental choice" (2013 [1984]: 58) for which no rational justification can be given (2013 [1984]: 47), elsewhere dubbed "radical choice" (2013 [1984]: 49–55). However, such choice fits the existentialism of Sartre more than Kierkegaard. See Rudd, 2012: 72–4; Stern, 2014 [2012]: 17.

[55] For theological voluntarism, see Wisdo, 1987; Kosch, 2006: chs. 5–6; Irwin, 2011: vol. iii, ch. 77. For realism, see Davenport, 2012: 121–5; Rudd, 2012: chs. 4–6.

[56] Some issues here may concern humans rather than God. But theological voluntarism does seem to run into many of the same issues as subjectivism unless the position is weakened significantly so that it resembles realism or divine command theory. Constructivism is not discussed.

Rather than relying on textual evidence mainly, I will here focus on how plausible and reasonable the different views are that we find in Kierkegaard's original texts and in the commentary literature.

5.2 Subjectivism and Theological Voluntarism Rejected

The Euthyphro dilemma concerns two separate issues. First, what is the right direction of fit? Does subjective valuing justify and ground values, or vice versa? Second, are subjectivism and theological voluntarism *arbitrary*? Unlike realism, which values something based on preexisting reasons or merits, both subjectivism and voluntarism confer value on something for *no* antecedent reason, without any preexisting grounding. Unlike realism, neither view allows antecedent reasons for valuing something (such as it being better, independent of one's subjective preferences). Instead, value is conferred – or even created – by subjective attitudes that one just happens to have. Valuing is then grounded in an agent's contingent attitude or concern (e.g., that he happens to *like* or desire it). But this involves rational (normative) *contingency,* where the agent is not normatively required or forbidden to have any such value-conferring attitudes or concerns. The mere fact that he or she happens to have it suffices.[57] As a result, subjective attitudes can confer value on anything. Killing and torture are only disvalued if one happens to dislike both (or have the relevant negative attitudes toward both). But equally, both are valued if one happens to like them (or have value-conferring pro-attitudes toward them) instead. In short, anything – including child sacrifice – goes, given a value-conferring attitude.

Like subjectivism, voluntarism then seems to *conflate* descriptions of subjective pro-attitudes (e.g., likes and desires) with evaluation of something as being sufficiently good, permissible, or acceptable. For valuing or desiring something is not the same as it being acceptable or good enough, since it is a conceptually *open question* whether our pro-attitudes are good enough or acceptable (to be acted upon).

However, there is a further issue with subjectivism and voluntarism here. For nothing precludes new attitudes (e.g., desires) that change values at any time. Any given value is therefore at best *provisionally* valid, given a contingent attitude that may change anytime. On the one hand, subjective attitudes that confer value could be changed forever (unless one were eternally changeless). On the other, one cannot really be bound

[57] See Portmore (2021) for a closely related point about reasons. Full-fledged subjectivism then has great difficulties with accounting for how we can be mistaken or wrong.

or constrained by any value, if it can be revoked at any time (by a new attitude). In his attack on subjectivism (which targets Kantian autonomy unfairly), Kierkegaard writes:

> If I am to bind myself and there is no binding force higher than myself, then where, as the A, who binds, can I find the rigor I do not possess as B, the one who is to be bound, when, after all, A and B are the same self[?] (SKS 23, 45, NB 15:66 / KJN 7, 42).

Values could then be changed at a *whim*. But the old values that are left behind cannot justify the new ones. The *leap* from one value to another then seems nonrational and unmotivated, splitting the life of the agent into two *unconnected* (incoherent) parts diachronically.[58]

Worse still, Kierkegaard points out that our special interests can unduly influence our values. Instead of living up to our existing values (or what *is* valuable), we can just change our values so that they become more pleasing to us or better serve our special interests. We can then just change our attitudes, concocting new values instead of living up to old ones. Instead of living morally (or doing our duty), we can then reflect forever about what our values could be, something that supports unrestrained, self-consuming reflection, as well as procrastination and corruption, that Kierkegaard finds in late modern European society:

> [T]he one who is to command and the one who is to obey are one and the same … It can so easily happen that the servant meddles in the deliberation about the task, and conversely, that the master pays too much attention to the servant's complaints about the difficulties in carrying out the tasks. Then, alas, confusion develops; instead of becoming his own master a person becomes unstable, irresolute, vacillating … Finally … all his energy is expended in thinking up ever new changes in the task (SKS 8, 389–90 / UD, 294–5; cp. SKS 11, 182–3 / SUD, 68–9).

To avoid these problems, we seem to need an *objective standard that* is independent of rationally (normatively) contingent pro-attitudes (Rudd, 2012; Portmore, 2021; Fremstedal, 2022).

5.3 Realism: The Priority of the Good

Unlike subjectivism and voluntarism, realism takes values to hold independently of value-conferring subjective attitudes of those "whom the value applies" (Hare, 2018: 50). Consider the value (and worth) of human

[58] This is not the kind of leap that Kierkegaard advocates. See Fremstedal, 2022: 173–87.

persons as a central example.[59] For subjectivism (and voluntarism), our value as persons is contingent on subjective attitudes that confer value. Someone is then valuable merely *to the extent that and because* someone happens to value them (where such valuing is not normatively required). By contrast, realism posits *objective* value that holds independent of and prior to our subjective attitudes (and stances). Our attitudes should then value what is already valuable.

Here Rudd argues that it does not make sense to assume that, as rational evaluative beings, we cannot be objectively right or even get closer to being right evaluatively (2012: 95). As rational beings, such objectivity is exactly what we must aim at:

> I have to ask, "Do *I* consider this, or that good?" And this is why I think that the idea of *the* Good is unavoidable, if only as a regulative ideal. It is what my moral deliberation has to be constantly moving towards (Rudd, 2012: 141).[60]

The good in this sense then arguably offers an objective, stable ground for evaluation that is not at the mercy of subjective contingencies and arbitrariness (Davenport, 2012). It allows us to prioritize, coordinate, shape, and unify different projects and commitments in light of *the* good (Rudd, 2012: 45–6, 139–40, 187–8). Here Kierkegaard repeatedly contrasts unconditional commitment toward the good, which represents wholeheartedness or "purity of heart," with incoherence (doublemindedness or despair):[61]

> The person who wills one thing that is not the good is actually not willing one thing; it is an illusion, a semblance, a deception, a self-deception that he wills only one thing – because in his innermost being he is, he must be, double-minded. This is why the apostle says, "Purify your hearts, you double-minded" (SKS 8, 139–40 / UD, 25; cp. SKS 3, 186 / EO2, 192).

To avoid doublemindedness (incoherence), the different values that we respond to must be "mutually consistent" and "intersubjectively sound"

[59] Davenport (2012: 105–22), and Rudd (2012: 132–4) take objective value to be closely connected to the moral value of persons with noninstrumental value. Indeed, Rudd suggests that the value of all persons could serve as basis for universal morality (2012: 132–4). Still, one could be a realist about other values obviously. In any case, Kierkegaard's realism is not a naturalistic one metaphysically or metaethically or even epistemically.

[60] Otherwise, we would at best be instrumentally rational agents since the substantial nonrationality of our motives, cares, and commitments would cascade down the levels (Rudd, 2012: 112; Fremstedal, 2022: 52).

[61] See especially "Purity of Heart," Part I of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.

(Davenport, 2012: 117). But this calls for a strong evaluation of different options that responds to putatively objective values (Davenport, 2012: 101–10; Rudd, 2012: 90–5). Such evaluation does not give in to the strongest desire or motive, but compares the substantial merits of different options, which hold independently of our subjective attitudes. For one option can be substantially better than another, even if it is not reflected in subjective attitudes or desires.

At issue here is what is good in itself (in an agent-neutral manner) rather than what is merely good for someone (in an agent-relative manner). As a realist, Kierkegaard suggests that our good lies not in the latter but rather in relating properly to (objective) value that is independent of our subjective attitudes and stances. Still, such realism comes in different variants (Rudd, 2012: 142–61). One variant just relates to the good by relating to different things and persons that have value. This requires coherent values, but not any Good with distinct existence apart from good things (as assumed by a stronger variant of realism). However, it is exactly such a Good Kierkegaard seems committed to. Like Plato, Kierkegaard sees the Good as eternal and transcendent by being "distinct from particular goods" (Rudd, 2012: 45). Rudd explains the advantage of this view as follows:

> [H]ow could we decide (non-arbitrarily) what an "appropriate balance" of the particular goods would be, unless we could appeal to a transcendent Good which stood apart from all the particular [goods] and so could provide a criterion for their ordering? [Without this Good,] we may have doubts about whether [our] various projects have enough value to make our lives as a whole worthwhile …. Without a source of absolute value to anchor the sense of the relative value of things, we may find an emptiness creeping into our experience of those things we had valued. (2012: 150–1)

The Good, which Kierkegaard takes to be *divine* and eternal (Rudd, 2012: 45), then underpins different values and allows us to rank them in a nonarbitrary manner (based on whether they participate in and resemble goodness presumably). However, Kierkegaard's *identification* of the good with the divine here does not fit the Euthyphro dilemma (cp. SKS 8, 364 / UD, 268; SKS 9, 13–16, 64, 252 / WL, 3–8, 58, 252). Timothy Jackson writes (independently of Kierkegaard):

> God *is* Goodness and, as such, the source and destiny of all that is. God does not discover goodness outside Himself and belatedly enjoin it …. Goodness and God are the same, so there is no need and no way to prioritize them relative to each other.… the ancient Euthyphro dilemma is a nonstarter (2014: 539).

To Kierkegaard, the good is not created or conferred by divine fiat or by contingent or arbitrary attitudes (Evans, 2006 [2004]; Stern, 2014 [2012]: 221–2; Fremstedal, 2022: 62–5, 112–14). Still, it need not be entirely independent of God either (as realism normally claims). Rather, it may reflect God's eternal, changelessness nature *as* good and loving.[62] This kind of view is distinct from realist views that take the good to be (at least in part) independent of and prior to God and his will. But instead of representing theological voluntarism, it seems to represent a *third* view that escapes the Euthyphro dilemma by identifying God with goodness. Unfortunately, this kind of view is relatively underexplored in the Kierkegaard literature, although it has long been discussed in theistic ethics that aim at escaping the Euthyphro dilemma. In different variants, this kind of third view has been much discussed since Augustine and medieval philosophy.[63]

This kind of view tries to combine two different assumptions. First, God grounds goodness, arguably by serving as a paradigm and standard of everything that is good.[64] Second, such goodness is not arbitrary or variable but rather invariable. Specifically, Kierkegaard suggests that goodness is based on the eternal, changeless nature of God.[65] Taken together, these assumptions indicate that God is identical to the Good *and* serves as a basis of moral evaluation. Independently of Kierkegaard, Murphy describes this kind of view as follows:

> God is Goodness, God has no choice about whether God is the ultimate end of all things; God's nature sets, of necessity, the measure for goodness, and it is not up to divine discretion whether God contributes to the being good of some particular being (so long as that being exists and bears that nature). (2016 [2011]: 176)

Even though there are different variants of this view, the core assumption shared by Kierkegaard and the contemporary work of Pettit (2009),

[62] See, for example, Kierkegaard's "The Changelessness of God" (1855) or even the three similar upbuilding discourses from 1843, all entitled "Every Good and Perfect Gift is from Above" (collected in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*).

[63] The doctrine of *divine simplicity* is perhaps the best-known example here. However, we need not assume divine simplicity, which rules out that "God is without complexity in his essential intrinsic nature," in order to identify God with goodness; instead, we can argue that the idea of God being identical to goodness is consistent and coherent (Pettit, 2009). Ironically, Pettit takes Kierkegaard to be a theological voluntarist here (2009: 128). But Kierkegaard's actual views are almost certainly far closer to the view that Pettit himself explores here.

[64] But unlike everything that has the "attribute of being good," "the Good" itself need not be an attribute (as claimed by the doctrine of divine simplicity), see Pettit, 2009: 132.

[65] Here Pettit (2009: 138) argues that not all of God's properties need not be immutable if he is to respond to our changing world.

Jackson (2014), and Murphy (2016 [2011]) is the identification of God with goodness that escapes the Euthyphro dilemma.[66] Even though this view remains underdeveloped in Kierkegaard scholarship, it nevertheless seems reasonably clear that this kind of view is essentially consistent and coherent and that it can account for how the good (and morality) is "objective, universal and invariable" (Pettit, 2009: 126). Such goodness is independent of our minds, even though it may nevertheless depend on the invariable mind of God (2009: 142). As such, it is not changeable or contingent, except that it may depend on God's unchangingness.

5.4 Divine Command Theory of Moral Requirements

Divine command theory, as opposed to theological voluntarism, concerns moral *requirements* (strict duties or obligations), which represent decisive normative *reasons* that are distinct from values (goods and evils). On this view, moral requirements are not just any kind of duties but rather represent the call and command of a good God who takes everything into consideration. Instead of being arbitrary, these commands are issued by a good God.[67] So even though these commands represent reasons and requirements (as opposed to values), it is not the case that they operate independently of the good. Rather, reasons and requirements are grounded in the good. Unlike theological voluntarism, divine command theory is then best seen as presupposing realism concerning value (the good).

Something can be good without being required, however. Requirements thus add a normative dimension that is distinct from the good but may nevertheless support it by making some acts or virtues obligatory, not just good (Evans, 2010: 119).[68] Neighbor love, notably, is not just good but divinely commanded and thus required, according to *Works of Love* (Quinn, 1996, 1998; Evans, 2006 [2004]).

More generally, divine commands make sense of moral requirements that are given by God, who – unlike other normative sources – is not just

[66] More generally, avoiding the Euthyphro dilemma is a much-discussed issue in theistic ethics. For extended discussion and overview over options, see, for example, Baggett and Walls, 2011: 84–216.

[67] Whether God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, *or* merely powerful and good, is controversial. Primary and secondary sources indicate that Kierkegaard held the former view, although this could be qualified by kenotic Christology. See Law (2013) for discussion.

[68] Hare (2018: 24) writes: "The good has priority to the right [that which is required] because everything that is right is good, though not vice versa. The right has priority to the good because the goods that God selects as mandatory [required] for us are, so to speak, trumps."

a lawgiver and judge but someone who forgives and assists us (Stern, 2014 [2012]: 204–16). In particular, such commands make sense of ethics that is highly demanding by requiring more than we are capable of by our own, unaided powers, so that divine assistance becomes necessary to bridge the moral gap (Fremstedal, 2014a: 205 and 2022: 63).

Clearly, Kierkegaard does describe many moral requirements as being divinely commanded. But even if divine commands may *suffice* for moral requirements, it is less clear if they are *necessary* for such requirements, since other normative sources cannot be ruled out entirely (see Manis, 2009). Indeed, divine commands cannot generate *all* moral requirements, including the requirement to obey divine commands *and* cases where human commands make something morally required (as is often the case with promises, see Hare, 2018: 18–20).

In any case, plausible forms of divine command theory accept realism regarding the good (Evans, 2006 [2004]). One strength of such theories is that they seem particularly able to account for how moral requirements are not just moral duties but requirements of practical reason, overall. That is, they can explain how moral requirements are overall requirements (as claimed by moral rationalism), which override all competing requirements. So even though moral agents lack a third (independent) standard that resolves normative conflict between morality and prudence, moral requirements could nevertheless have a priority that prudential requirements lack, thereby providing decisive reasons (best and most reason). At least, this makes sense if moral requirements reflect the will of a good God that must take everything into consideration by being omniscient or by offering non-perspectival overall verdicts. This is particularly so if morality is grounded in an absolute value, which represents a transcendent Good above all other goods (cp. Rudd, 2012: 150). In this picture, we basically have a moral order and a personal God that supports moral rationalism (something that sets it apart from some competing views). Still, divine command theory is more controversial than realism is in the contemporary context (even though no view is undisputed). (This is no surprise, however, since the former, unlike most forms of realism, presupposes religious ethics.)

6 Moral Epistemology Versus Metaphysical and Theological Implications

6.1 Introducing the Problem

In different ways, the preceding sections point to close connections between the ethical and religious in Kierkegaard. I have argued that, despite

appearances, Kierkegaard is clear that religion supports ethics, instead of undermining it (Sections 2 and 3). On the other hand, he indicates that ethics itself has religious implications in different ways. First, moral reasons support religious belief (Section 4). Second, ethics itself seems to have theological and metaphysical implications metaethically (Section 5). Particularly divine command theories and (nonnaturalist or even supernaturalists) moral realism, which are well-represented in Kierkegaard studies, do suggest this.

However, this leads to a question: How are ethics and religion related epistemically: Must moral agents have some *prior* knowledge of, or belief in, religious matters in order to be moral? Is moral life then somehow impossible for nonreligious persons (who lack religious virtues such as faith and hope)? If so, that would surely seem to condition moral capabilities on religious presuppositions in a questionable and dubious manner.

But the opposite view also seems problematic, at least for Kierkegaardians. For if moral capabilities do not come with any religious presuppositions at all, or if moral epistemology is entirely independent of religious epistemology, why does morality allegedly need religion? Thus, it seems that Kierkegaardians face a dilemma here: Either religious issues appear *redundant*, or they limit and condition morality so that religious persons allegedly have – at least – a moral *advantage* over nonreligious ones?

6.2 Untangling the Knot

To untangle this knot, we need to sketch how morality and religion are related more precisely by distinguishing *epistemology* from *metaethics* (and meta-normativity more generally). How we know something or get justified belief about it is one matter. Metaethical issues that concern the metaphysical and theological implications of morality are another matter. At least, it is not the case that moral agents must first know the metaethical, metaphysical, and theological implications of morality before they can recognize moral truth or act morally (or to use moral terms correctly). Rather, it is the other way around. We often *recognize* some moral *truth*, or act on it, without seeing (all) implications or presuppositions metaethically, metaphysically, and theologically. On the one hand, we often recognize moral *value* by comparing the goodness and badness of different options or by seeing the value of someone or something. On the other hand, we can *reason* morally and consider something to be morally forbidden, permitted, or required.

Consider divine command ethics, in which moral requirements *are* divine commandments (at least to a great extent). It is not the case here that we must first know the will of God before we can act morally (or recognize moral requirements). Specifically, we must not know God's revealed will from supernatural revelation before we act morally. Instead, we often act morally, and recognize moral requirements, moral values, or moral truths, without realizing that morality is divinely supported (or commanded), or without relying on supernatural revelation. Moral agents do not need courses in metaethics, metaphysics, theology, or Kierkegaard studies before they can act morally or see moral truth. Rather, they often see what morality requires of them, without seeing the metaethical, metaphysical, and theological implications of morality (Adams, 2002: ch. 1). Thus, it is perfectly possible for nonbelievers to act morally and to recognize moral truth (which is not to say that there is no need for second ethics, since the first ethics is perfect in all respects). But it is equally possible that philosophers and theologians see the metaphysical, metaethical, and theological implications of morality better than other agents do. And that seems to be Kierkegaard's view (Evans, 2006 [2004]).

6.3 Moral Awareness of God as Good?

We have seen that Kierkegaard takes God to be good. Indeed, he identifies God with moral goodness and love. By being aware of moral goodness, we thereby have an awareness of God for practical purposes, even though we may not recognize the good *as* divine. We then relate to God *de re* by relating to goodness, even if we do not relate to him *de dicto*, by seeing him as God. Paul Moser writes:

> God could be present *de re*, as an influential reality, in human moral experience without *de dicto* comportment of human classification of the relevant power *as God*. (2022: 25 referencing his 2021 article on Kierkegaard)[69]

For practical purposes, it then seems that we become aware of the divine through morality for Kierkegaard. Therefore, he (and his pseudonyms) identifies the ethical and its duties with God and the divine (SKS 4, 160 / FT, 68), seeing moral duties or requirements as expressing God's will (Pap. IV, B67 / JP 1, 908; SKS 4, 153 / FT, 60). A related point here is made by Anders Sandøe Ørsted: "One may say of a virtuous atheist that

[69] This kind of approach is developed at length by Evans (2010) and Moser (2021, 2022), both as accounts of Kierkegaard and as accounts of how morality may access God more generally.

he cognizes [*erkiender*] the same God with his heart as he denies with his mouth" (1799: 108 note, my trans.). Here the moral agent is taken to cognize God for practical purposes by having a moral heart and by being virtuous, even if he denies God theoretically (intellectually) by being an atheist.[70] And this is just the kind of view that Kierkegaard seems committed to as well. For practical purposes, nonbelievers can (re-)cognize the good, even though they do not identify the good with the divine as believers do or form the same beliefs.

However, consider the following distinction between theoretical (intellectual) and practical aspects of religious belief:

> Christian belief as mere intellectual assent: someone believes by having propositional attitudes that assents to Christian doctrine, without acting on it or living by it.
>
> Christian living without intellectual assent: someone lives and acts as a Christian but lacks the relevant propositional beliefs that assent to Christian doctrine.

To Kierkegaard, the former is so inadequate that he prefers the latter instead (even though the best would be belief in which intellectual assent and living *fit* and *support* each other reciprocally).[71] Still, the important point here is that there is a sense in which one can have religious belief practically without assenting to doctrine intellectually and propositionally. That is, one can lack assent (to doctrine, dogmas, and articles of faith) but nevertheless live and act as a Christian. At least this seems possible as long as one is not absolutely certain that God does not exist. In addition, such belief (for practical purposes) seems impossible if one does not see theism positively in any way (e.g., by desiring it to be true or by seeing it as good), for one would then lack motives that could support being committed toward it. But apart from these extreme cases, one could have one type of belief without the other. Specifically, one could act and live as a Christian even if one is an atheist (or agnostic) theoretically.[72] First, an atheist (or agnostic) may hope that he is wrong about God's existence. Second, atheists (and agnostics) may even act and live as

[70] Clearly, Ørsted follows Kant more closely here than Kierkegaard does. For examples of Kierkegaard's reference and dedication to Ørsted, see, for example, SKS 28, 494–5, 500, 512 / LD, 430, 432. See also Helms (2025) on Kierkegaard and H. C. Ørsted (and to a lesser extent A. S. Ørsted, who was his brother and fellow Kantian).

[71] Both forms of belief arguably involve a trusting commitment toward something or someone. See Jackson, 2024: 9–13.

[72] Here atheists "disbelieve that at least one God exists," where God is "a powerful, good creator" (Jackson, 2024: 3).

if theism were true by committing to it for practical purposes (Jackson, 2024: 12–19). Yet, in extreme cases, we might worry that such cases involve mere simulacra and/or doublemindedness, incoherence, or some cognitive dissonance. But apart from this, there is some room for practical belief without theoretical assent to doctrine. So, it does make sense to say that one can be a religious believer in one sense but not another.

Still, Kierkegaard is clear that "Christian awakening" requires "the firmness and definiteness of conceptual language" (SKS 15, 270 / BA, 114–15). Here Moser argues that, to Kierkegaard, Christian faith requires *de dicto* content that offers stability, definiteness, and specificity (2021: 146). But the same is not the case with *natural* religion, which Kierkegaard (Climacus) describes both as "immanent religiousness" and as "the ethico-religious" (in a narrow sense). Here Kierkegaard suggests that our diverse perspectives differ about *de dicto* content but nevertheless agree insofar as they lead to the one truth and fit one object only (2010: 142; see also SKS 15, 269n / BA, 113n). God *de re* is then the only fitting and actual object of faith if de dicto content is lacking (Moser, 2021: 143). In more familiar Kierkegaardian terms, there is only one fitting object to human passion and inwardness, rightly understood (SKS 7, 182, 210, 554–9 / CUP1, 199, 230, 610–6; SKS 22, 414, NB14:121 / KJN 6, 420). However, this object seems to be not just God (SKS 7, 210 / CUP1, 230), but also his kingdom (SKS 7, 354–9, 388 / CUP1, 389–94, 426–7 on "eternal happiness"). Instead of supporting subjectivism and relativism, this points to objective moral constraints on passion and inwardness that involve seriousness and guilt-consciousness (Fremstedal, 2022: 141–69).[73]

Clearly, it is not just moral goodness and love that are relevant here but rather that we see what morality requires of us and that we are then confronted with the moral gap (Evans, 2006 [2004]: 172). Again, by exceeding our natural capabilities, the moral requirement let us confront our moral shortcomings and the need for divine help. In Kierkegaard's words: "the emphasis is … upon the requirement manifesting itself to a person it its full infinitude, so that one properly learns to be humbled and to take refuge in grace" (SKS 24, 163, NB22:112 / KJN 8, 161). Evans writes:

> [T]he claim that some moral obligations can be a natural sign for God does not require the truth of a [divine command theory of moral obligations] …. All that is needed in order for it to be true that there

[73] Like hope, faith seems to be a virtue that disposes the virtuous to respond properly emotionally. See Roberts (2022: 26, 213, 271–2) and West (2013) respectively.

> are natural signs for God in our moral experience is that *some* moral obligations be divine commands or depend on divine commands in the relevant way. (2010: 141)

In the case of the value of people, it is possible for nonbelievers to recognize their value as persons. Evans comments:

> [P]erhaps the person is seeing the image of God in the person, is recognizing the person as made in God's image, even if the person does not realize that this is what the person is seeing. In this way the person would perceiving a natural sign for God: perceiving something that God created and intended to function as a pointer towards God (2010: 146).

Such (Reidean) signs allow a "*de re* awareness of God" that is widely available to moral agents *and* easily resistible, since they underdetermine religious beliefs and could therefore be interpreted in nonreligious terms (2010: 36, 185). But like the moral argument for belief in God, these signs nevertheless point toward God as being good (2010: 147).

This is related to the fact that Kierkegaard conceives of the self in *relational* and intersubjective terms. Specifically, the self is a self-relating process that relates not just to itself but also to human others and to God (Stokes, 2015: 145). Therefore, our self-relation is fundamentally intertwined with our relation to others and God, such that "a discord in any" relation "prevents the others from taking their proper form" (Davenport, 2013: 239n; cp. Lippitt, 2015: 96, 102, 109, 136, 182). Proper selfhood, which is wholehearted, then requires that we relate correctly to God *and* others (Fremstedal, 2022: 23–4).

Here *Works of Love* describes God metaphorically as the "middle term" that connects different persons, making us all into human beings who are created in his image (SKS 9, 94, 111, 124, 219–26, 299 / WL, 88–9, 106–7, 121, 216–24, 301; cp. SKS 10, 43–4 / CD, 32–3). The point here seems to be that without God as creator, there "wouldn't be any possibility," since the ground of "everything possible" would be missing. Thus, different possibilities must be grounded in God as creator, who enables possibilities and hope in the first place (Dalferth, 2023: 77–8, 101). And it is only by seeing yourself as the neighbor of God that you may relate to others as someone who is also God's neighbor. Human equality here means that we are all God's neighbor (2023: 98–9, 162).

Still, the theological implications of morality are best seen *retrospectively* from the perspective of Christian faith and Christian ethics. Faith recognizes pre-Christian (natural) ethics as being valid and necessary, as an imperfect

anticipation of Christian ethics (which for Kierkegaard is decisive since we cannot possibly receive divine grace without first being sinners under the law who repent and feel guilty). *Works of Love*, for instance, argues that Christian love improves on pagan love by avoiding despair and by being more stable and independent (SKS 9, 36 / WL, 29). Here Evans argues that non-Christian views are prone to errors and vagueness that are corrected and clarified by Christianity (2006 [2004]: 110). However, Kierkegaard is clear that Christian *revelation* is needed to diagnose our situation and its cure. Specifically, we have seen that sin-consciousness is decisive, as is Christ as a paradigm to be imitated by Christians. Without these, there is no Christian ethics.

6.4 Theological Implications of Morality

For Kierkegaard, we can recognize moral truth and have some justified beliefs morally without seeing the metaphysical and theological commitments of morality. In this sense, moral agents need not be religious believers (who assent to doctrine or dogma), although morality nevertheless has metaphysical and theological implications. However, Kierkegaard argues that Christian belief and its ethics go beyond natural religion by requiring (at least some) firm and definite conceptual language (SKS 15, 269–73 / BA, 113–18). Specifically, doctrine seems necessary for Christian belief and ethics. Therefore, Christian ethics cannot be separated entirely from Christian theology, metaphysics, and metaethics.

Still, there is nevertheless some room for secular ethics in Kierkegaard in the sense that he recognizes natural, non-Christian ethics (i.e., the first ethics) as being valid and necessary. As the concept of the first ethics suggests, he even takes it to be the natural, default starting point epistemically presupposed even by Christian ("second") ethics. Instead of being superfluous, the first ethics is necessary and valid for addressing nonbelievers and for motivating and justifying transitions (conversions) to Christianity (by removing hindrances to faith). Still, the first ethics remains at most an imperfect anticipation of Christian ethics, which – unlike the latter – is ultimately sinful if it is absolutized and prevents Christian ethics. Moreover, Kierkegaard seems to object to secular ethics in two other respects. First, he maintains that non-Christian ethics collapses unless Christian ethics is introduced (see Section 3). Second, he is clear that moral Goodness (as such) is not religiously neutral. Rather, it is divine and deserves to be capitalized (Evans, 2006 [2004]: 88, 105n, 183).

7 Closing Words

In different ways, many have objected to the (at least apparent) lack of secular ethics in Kierkegaard (see Brandes, 1877; Høffding, 1919; Fox-Muraton, 2020). However, I have argued that there is some room for secular ethics in Kierkegaard, since he does see non-Christian ethics (i.e., the first ethics) as being valid and necessary, even if it is ultimately imperfect and lacking without Christian ethics.

Another issue is the apparent *circularity* of Kierkegaard's account, in which ethics presupposes religion and vice versa. However, we have seen that this apparent circularity can be weakened by distinguishing moral epistemology from metaethics, metaphysics, and theology. Specifically, we have seen that even if some aspects of morality do depend on God, there nevertheless has to be natural access to it as well. For nonbelievers may recognize moral truth without seeing the metaphysical, metaethical, and theological implications of morality. Like believers, nonbelievers can recognize moral requirements, even though they cannot see them *as* being divinely commanded in any literal sense.

Kierkegaard's account of how ethics and religion interrelate involves significant *complexity*. On the one hand, moral reasons could support religious belief (see Sections 4.3 and 4.4). Here pragmatism regarding religious belief holds that practical (moral and prudential) reasons can justify religious belief (if epistemic evidence is lacking). To make sense, however, such reasons must belong to pre-Christian ("first") ethics, not to Christian ("second") ethics. At best, these reasons may justify Christian belief (see Section 4.4 for a discussion).

In any case, I have argued that the belief in question here is not just religious but rather concerns a morally good God as well as a *moral order* represented by the highest good. Specifically, the *highest good* comprises (full) virtue, justice, and desert as well as an ethical commonwealth (see Section 3.4). However, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* is often taken to represent a counterexample to such moralized and broadly Kantian accounts of religion. Here I argue that, despite appearances, even this case does not support an immoral or amoral religion. Instead, a closer examination indicates that religious belief must support morality (see Section 2). Even the notorious "teleological suspension of the ethical" does not deny moral requirements, but *preserves* and reaffirms ethics, by giving it a new *telos*, in "eternal salvation [*evig … Salighed*, translated eternal happiness elsewhere]" (SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54). But this telos is just another name for the "highest good," which

is an Augustinian-Kantian concept for a moral order, in which happiness is limited by and conditioned on moral (and theological) virtue (see Section 3.4). Indeed, we have seen that *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* interprets the teleological suspension as a suspension of pre-Christian ("first") ethics by Christian ethics (SKS 7, 242–3 / CUP1, 266–7). The latter supports and modifies the former by introducing divine assistance and grace (Fremstedal, 2022: 125–6). This makes sense since the telos of morality, the highest good, is so demanding that it exceeds human powers, requiring divine assistance. Like other writings, *The Concept of Anxiety* makes the case that morality is so demanding that we cannot live up to its requirements by our own, unaided powers. Therefore, divine assistance and grace become decisive (SKS 4, 323–31 / CA, 16–24). Kierkegaard quite consistently maintains that it is against this moral background that Christianity is to be understood:

> the [ethical] requirement should indeed be stated, presented, and heard. From the Christian point of view, there ought to be no scaling down of the requirement, nor suppression of it—instead of a personal admission and confession. The requirement should be heard … so that I might learn … to resort to *grace* (SKS 12, 15 / PC, 7; cp. SKS 24, 163–4, NB22:112 / KJN 8, 161–2).

At issue here are several distinct issues. Of these, divine grace has received the most attention in the Kierkegaard literature. Specifically, divine *grace* is needed for religious conversion, sanctification, and salvation, as well as for moral character and forgiveness of guilt and sin, which overcomes immorality, vice, and despair. Similarly, divine power and intervention are necessary for personal immortality and eternal salvation (which, again, rely on divine grace and justice, cp. SKS 20, 289, NB4:5 / CD, 378; SKS 8, 227–8 / UD, 127–8; SKS 18, 309–10, JJ:508 / KJN 2, 284–5).

Unlike the Kant literature, the Kierkegaard literature has given relatively little attention to the fact that divine assistance seems necessary for moral justice and desert that systematically reconciles moral virtue with happiness (so that immorality does not pay, and morality does not require net self-sacrifice). Likewise, divine assistance seems necessary for the unification and coordination of all ethico-religious agents in the kingdom of God. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how all agents can be unified and coordinated, especially if past and future generations are to be included (see Section 3.4).

Like Hare (2002 [1996]), Kierkegaard then identifies the "moral gap" between our moral requirements and our natural capability to live by

these requirements. To both, divine assistance bridges the moral gap. But unlike Kierkegaard, Hare formulates and discusses three different alternatives to divine assistance (which will be discussed here quite independently of his account):

The first alternative is to *enhance* human capacities, something Hare argues is overly optimistic and wishful by exaggerating our natural capacities (2002 [1996]: ch. 4, criticizing utilitarianism and optimism). However, the recent literature on human enhancement and posthumanism, which Hare does not engage with here, has a very different (and less theological) understanding of moral character and perfection than the Kantian-Kierkegaardian view of Hare.[74] At least, this literature is hardly at all concerned with the realization of the highest good or the kingdom of God (as such). Instead, it is typically concerned with cosmetic surgery, doping, psychopharmaceutical drugs, as well as genetical and neurological manipulation (Juengst and Moseley, 2025: part i.i). This may involve longevity, but not immorality or eternity in any traditional sense concerned with divine judgment and grace or the kingdom of God (which concerns Kant, Kierkegaard, and Hare). However, Kant offers principled reasons why only God can enable the highest good (given our moral efforts). Specifically, since the highest good is conditioned on (moral) virtue, *omniscience* is required for scrutinizing all hearts and minds (reins) to see who is truly virtuous (or willing to accept divine grace, alternatively). Moreover, *omnipotence* is required in order to condition all nature and all happiness on moral virtue, so that our world becomes a moral order without exception. Finally, perfect moral goodness and justice are needed to let moral virtue bring happiness in all cases (Kant, 1900– and 1999: vol. v, 140; 1900– and 2006: vol. v, 444; 1900– and 2001: vol. xxviii, 1012; 2007: A814–5/B842–3). Much the same would be needed for divine grace (as opposed to divine justice). But if this is true, or even close to it, it would be in principle impossible for human enhancement to replace God here.[75]

The second alternative to divine assistance here is to find a *naturalistic substitute* for divine assistance (e.g., social evolution), something Hare argues we have reason to be skeptical about (2002 [1996]: ch. 7, criticizing Donald Campbell, David Gauthier, and Allan Gibbard). Again, and quite independently of Hare, it is not clear how God could be substituted

[74] However, Juengst and Moseley (2025: part vi) conclude that "biomedical enhancements will never yield comprehensive improvements in moral character."

[75] However, Hare (2002 [1996]) does not explicitly use or endorse this Kantian argument insofar as I can see.

naturalistically, particularly not if omniscience, omnipotence, or moral perfection are needed. Even if historical progress, notably, may remove some hindrances to justice, or include more agents, it still falls short of fully realizing the highest good or ethical commonwealth (that includes all agents historically). This is related to the fact that, to prevent or undermine the highest good as a whole, it is sufficient to undermine one of its constitutive elements. Therefore, we have seen that undermining either virtue, or happiness, or the universal ethical commonwealth is enough to undercut the entire highest good. Strictly speaking, a single case would be enough, even if this case belongs to the past. Again, the conclusion is that the realization of the highest good is extremely demanding and far beyond individual, human powers (see Section 3.4).

The final and most realistic alternative, however, is simply moral *laxness* and complacency that makes morality more realistic by greatly reducing its requirements. Particularly moral impartiality can then be replaced to a great extent with partiality (see Hare, 2002 [1996]: ch. 6; Stern, 2014 [2012]: 200–18, 244–52). To Kierkegaard, such lax ethics conflates moral requirements with prudential goods that serve self-interest, something he associates with Aristotelean and ancient Greek ethics (SKS 4, 324 / CA, 16–17; cp. SKS 9, 60 / WL, 53):

> To reduce the requirement in order that one might be better to fulfill it (as if this was what was earnestness: so that now it could more easily be seen that one is earnest about wanting to fulfill the requirement) – is opposed by the innermost essence of [Christianity]. No – infinite humbling, and grace, and then the striving of thankfulness: this is [Christianity]. (SKS 24, 163–4, NB22:112 / KJN 8, 162)

Strictly speaking, Kierkegaard has two different points here. On the one hand, lax morality tends to conflate moral requirements with self-interested reasons, something that involves a clear element of moral corruption and sinfulness (SKS 4, 324 / CA, 16–17). Unlike impartial morality, such lax morality is partial to oneself and those who are near and dear to oneself. On the other hand, lax morality contradicts Christianity by undercutting the moral demandingness that it responds to. By failing to show how demanding morality is, lax morality therefore undermines the humbleness and guilt-consciousness that is necessary for religiousness. Likewise, it undermines the very need for divine assistance and grace. Kierkegaard is, therefore, quite clear that Christianity presupposes and responds to moral demandingness. By exceeding our natural capabilities, such a demanding morality confronts us with our moral limits and shortcomings as well as the need for divine help.

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Abbreviations of Kierkegaard's writings are according to this format:

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CA *Concept of Anxiety*, trans. by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

CD *Christian Discourses*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

CUP1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), vol. i.

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